

# CINEFANTASTIQUE

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007 PREVIEW  
TOMORROW  
NEVER DIES

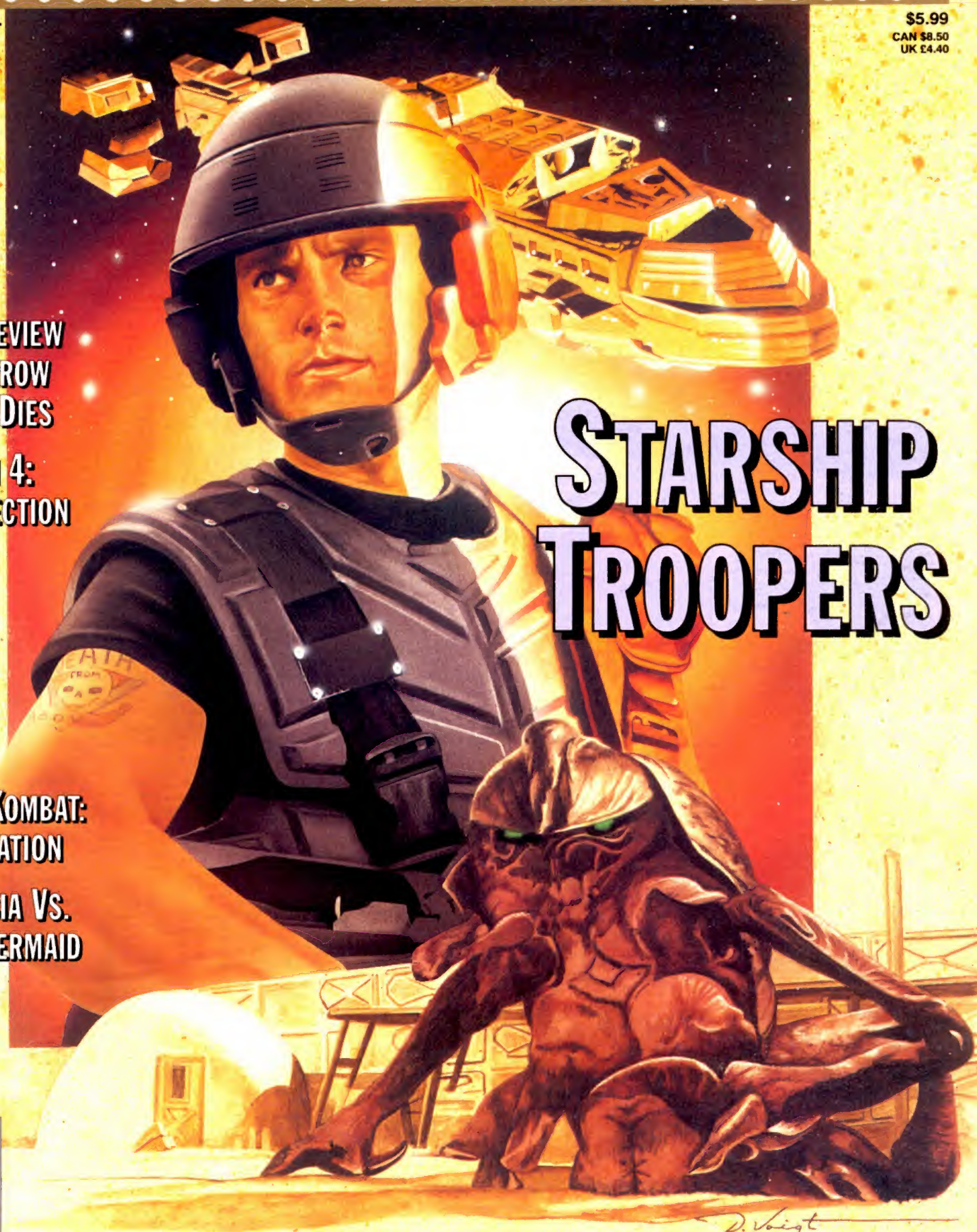
ALIEN 4:  
RESURRECTION

MORTAL KOMBAT:  
ANNIHILATION

ANASTASIA VS.  
LITTLE MERMAID

## STARSHIP TROOPERS

Volume 29 Number 8



*D. Voigt*



# CINEFANTASTIQUE

## 007 TOMORROW NEVER DIES

# THE REVIEW OF HORROR FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, YOUR GENRE NEWS MONTHLY

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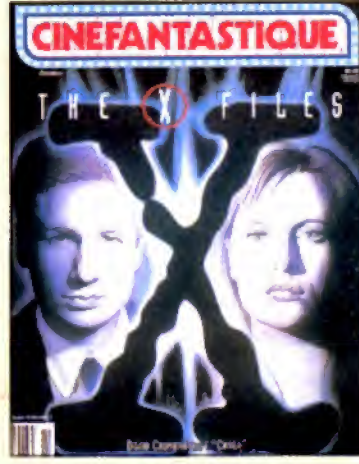
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"The Magazine with a Sense of Wonder"

DECEMBER 1997

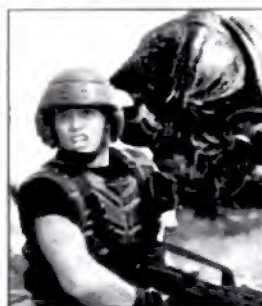
We all know violence and killing are fun, or at least they seem that way in the movies. Especially in *cinefantastique*, the one-step remove from reality grants a kind of license to play out adolescent male fantasies without any consideration of realistic consequences. For example, the fact that STAR WARS is set "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" means that countless storm troopers can be mowed down by good guys to wild audience approval; the film is too far removed from reality for this to be objectionable. On the other hand, films as diverse as RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK and INDEPENDENCE DAY place their fantasy threats closer to home and use them to arouse feelings of simple-minded patriotism that justify violent action that is not presented as a necessary evil but as something actively to be enjoyed.

STARSHIP TROOPERS exploits this gung-ho attitude to great—but ultimately subversive—effect. The film invokes all the usual propaganda devices to make audiences eagerly anticipate the battle scenes; Paul Verhoeven presents the benevolent face of Earth's one-world government with a strong underlying irony, but he uses the alien threat to make you overlook the blatant fascist undertones—you want to be on that drop ship, doing your part to protect the status quo. But ultimately, the whole thing is a clever feat of directorial manipulation. Having practically hypnotized viewers into accepting the pro-fascist state of mind, Verhoeven hits them with carnage of an incredibly graphic level—an all-out visceral assault that seems designed to shock viewers into a new awareness. Without directly challenging the political system in place, this initial defeat does show the dangers of blindly following the planning and pronouncements of that system. While the war itself still remains a necessary means of survival, undermined is the sense of fun that so often seems to be the *raison d'être* of genre entries like STAR WARS and RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. It's a daring, applaudable approach, one that successfully allows the film to eat its cake and have it too.

Steve Biodrowski



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## BACK IN BONDAGE

### TOMORROW NEVER DIES (MGM/UA)

Advanced footage screened by the studio earlier this year was truly spectacular, promising that this entry in the Bond series will far surpass its predecessor, *GOLDENEYE*. The pre-credits sequence is breath-taking; Teri Hatcher is an alluring Bond girl; Jonathan Pryce is an amusing monomaniacal villain; Michael Yeoh (a.k.a. Michelle Kahn) gets to show off her martial arts moves with aplomb; and Pierce Brosnan is in fine form as 007. Desmond Llewelyn returns as Q, and Judi Dench makes a second appearance as M. Roger Spottiswoode directed from a script by Bruce Feirstein. SEE PAGE 8



December 19

### ALIEN: RESURRECTION (Fox)

November 28

Advance word from audience test screenings has been positive, indicating that French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet has managed to adapt his distinct visual style to the rigors of Hollywood filmmaking. According to Fox exec Jorge Saralegui, the selection of an untried director to helm the franchise installments is a matter of show-business reality. "Major directors don't want to do a sequel, because they don't see an upside," said Saralegui. "They will do sequels of their own franchise, but why would they want to follow in the tracks of Ridley Scott and Jim Cameron and, in hindsight, David Fincher? Then it becomes a matter of do you want to stick your neck out and go with somebody who has a really distinct vision? Or somebody who is very competent and will deliver a very effective version of a highly commercial script. We did want a distinct talent." SEE PAGE 12. Dale Kutzera

### AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (Hollywood) December 25

In an impressive piece of corporate synergy, this picture from Disney's subsidiary division was pushed back from an October 3 release to replace the sequel to *SCREAM*, which had been rescheduled from December 12 by Dimension-Miramax, which was bought up by Disney a few years ago. Then dimension threw a monkey wrench into the works by shifting *SCREAM 2* back to December 12. Hollywood Pictures obligingly moved this film out of the way, to December 25. The trailer features some obvious CGI effects that belong in a virtual reality simulator, not in a movie. SEE CFQ 29:6-7.

### ANASTASIA (Fox)

November 21

Directed by Don Bluth and Gary Goldman (the team behind *THE LAND BEFORE TIME*), this first film from Fox's new animation unit hits theatres after months of preparation and build-up. "It's an amazing process," said producer Maureen Donley, who also worked on many Disney efforts. "It goes on for so long, because it's such a huge endeavor. You're talking about a collaboration of many people. Even after having gone through it on *LITTLE MERMAID*, *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, and *ALADDIN*, it's still very exciting to watch." SEE PAGE 32. Mike Lyons

### FLUBBER (Disney)

November 28

Robin Williams stars in this retitled remake of *THE ABSENT MINDED-PROFESSOR*, which puts considerably more emphasis than its predecessor on the title substance, which takes on a life of its own. Whereas the original was short on effects (primarily the flying Model-T and several high-jumping basketball players), the remake will feature extensive computer generated imagery, supervised by Tom Bertino of ILM. "In the original, what we did see of the Flubber was very limited by the technology of the time. It didn't look like it was coexisting with the live-action at all convincingly. Hopefully, we've jumped that hurdle." SEE PAGE 10. Patrick Legare

# RELEASE SCHEDULE

Upcoming cinefantastique at a glance, along with a word or two for the discriminating viewer.

compiled by Jay Stevenson  
(unless otherwise noted)



### THE LITTLE MERMAID (Disney)

November 14

Earlier this year, Disney announced a November 26 re-release for this film, which would have opened it shortly after *ANASTASIA*. Now, they've changed their minds and decided to get a jump on the upstart competition by opening the film a week before the new animated effort from former Disney employees Don Bluth, Gary Goldman, and Maureen Donley. It just goes to show, you don't mess around with Mickey. SEE PAGE 38.

### MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION (New Line)

November 21

Much of the appeal of *MORTAL KOMBAT* I rested on its Fant-Asia style fight sequences. For the sequel, fight choreographer Pat Johnson and star Robin Shou set out to top the original in this regard, creating fanciful footwork without going so far over the top as to leave American audiences behind. Said Shou, "Some choreographers can be too technical with the martial art. I might be wrong, and I might be criticized, but I feel a movie has to be entertaining, and it's okay to be a bit stylish. *MORTAL KOMBAT* can be stylish without going over the top. In *ANNIHILATION*, I am trying to find a style somewhere between Hong Kong and American style martial arts, taking a bit of Jet Li and a bit of [Steven] Seagal, to find a new form of martial art." SEE PAGE 14. Craig D. Reid

### OFFICE KILLER (Strand)

December 3 (exclusive)

This low-budget horror effort from Good Fear (the genre division of Good Machine, also responsible for *LOVE GOD*) hits the art houses for a limited engagement. Carol Kane, Molly Ringwald, and Jeanne Tripplehorn star. SEE PAGE 42.

### THE POSTMAN (Warners) December 26

Kevin Costner steps behind the camera for the first time since winning an Oscar for *DANCES WITH THE WOLVES*. Costner also stars as a wandering messenger in a post-apocalyptic world where society has been reduced to isolated hamlets. The futuristic thriller was adapted by Brian Koppelman and Eric Roth from the novel by David Brin. SEE CFQ 28:8:5.

### SCREAM 2 (Dimension) December 12

A December 12 date was temporarily abandoned for this sequel to last year's sleeper success. Then it was reinstated after execs saw a rough cut of the film.

### SPHERE (Warners)

February 13

Originally set to open in December, this big-budget adaptation of Michael Crichton's bestseller was moved back to allow more time for marketing and post-production. Barry Levinson directs Dustin Hoffman and Samuel L. Jackson.

## THE EYES HAVE IT

### MR. MAGOO (Walt Disney)

Leslie Nielsen plays a live-action version of the well-known, animated character. When a stolen gem lands in the possession of the nearsighted millionaire, a sinister plot is hatched to steal it back. Perpetually the target of evil culprits, the bumbling Magoo manages to consistently escape unharmed, totally oblivious to the dangers that surround him. Hunted by robbers and set-up by a conniving female thief, Magoo ultimately nabs the villains with the help of his nephew Waldo and his trusty bulldog Angus. *SUPERCOP*-director Stanley Tong (making his US debut) directs, from a script by Pat Proft & Tom Sherohman. Kelly Lynch, Ernie Hudson, Stephen Tobolowsky, and Malcolm McDowell co-star.

December 25





# HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC

## X: THE UNKNOWN TITLE

*Fox keeps a tight lid on the secrets of "the X-FILES motion picture."*

by Douglas Eby

Keeping tight control of any story details, 20th Century Fox is not yet even releasing a final title for the feature film based on its hugely popular and Emmy-winning series, THE X-FILES. At one point, the intentionally misleading title BLACKWOOD was attached, and there are baseball caps and directors chairs with that name to be seen on Stage 14 of the Fox lot, where a recent press junket was held. But the official "preliminary production information" lists the film only as "The X-Files motion picture," and says little about the story other than "Mulder and Scully are drawn into a web of intrigue while investigating the mysterious bombing of a Dallas office building and the secrets inside."

The expected characters are involved: all the series regulars. New cast members include some intriguing choices, though information on their characters was not forthcoming: Lucas Black (SLING BLADE), Blythe Danner, Glenna Headly, Martin Landau (ED WOOD), Terry O'Quinn (MILLENNIUM), and Armen Mueller-Stahl (SHINE).

Rob Bowman said one of the reasons he wanted to direct the movie, following the multitude of X-FILES episodes he's done, was "because I've earned it." And he noted, "The challenge is, with the size of the TV show as it is now, how is it we do something worthy of the big screen that's going to exceed what people expect on Sunday nights? And I tell you, I didn't know if we were going to do it, how Chris was going to come up with something, but he did." The film supposedly will provide a culmination for a fifth season cliffhanger episode of the series, yet to be shot, as Gillian Anderson said: "I think it resolves some stuff. It also asks more questions."

One of the main challenges in even attempting a film, according to creator, producer and writer Chris Carter was to make it fresh enough to hold the interest of the huge fan base, as well as new-



The top-secret feature film version of Fox's THE X-FILES television show quietly began production disguised under the title of BLACKWOOD.

comers. "I want to make a movie for everyone," said Carter, "even people who may not have seen THE X-FILES, and the trap to fall into there would be that I would forsake the hardcore viewing audience, even the casual viewing audience, by having to go over some material that would insult their intelligence or not be true to the series. I've tried, and I believe I'm successful, in cleverly doing two things at once, which is to reestablish their characters, making it interesting so it will appeal to everyone, and get on with telling a good X-FILES story."

According to co-writer and coproducer Frank Spotnitz much of the material in the series—the plot elements, topics taken from newspaper stories, characters, and so on—"get raised, and they come to an end. Not everything you've seen in the five-year life of the series comes back in the movie, but what matters comes back. And some things that have been introduced in the show that you may not have realized were critical to the grand conspiracy, come back in a big way in the movie. There will be a lot of light bulbs going off in people's heads." □

## Short Notes

George Romero (DAWN OF THE DEAD) has signed to direct CHAIN LETTER, the first in a proposed horror franchise, for producer Joe Wizan (THE GUARDIAN). Romero will rewrite the script by Gene Quintano (SUDDEN DEATH), about three teenagers who must save themselves and their town from supernatural events. ☺ David Goyer (DARK CITY) has turned in his first draft of QUATERMASS AND THE PIT to execs at New Line Cinema. If the project gets the greenlight, it could go before the cameras next summer, under the direction of Alex Proyas. This would make it the first of the long-discussed remakes of classic Hammer films to become a reality. ☺ Makeup expert Rob Bottin (SEVEN) is planning to make his feature directing debut with the long-in-development FREDDY VS JASON film, which will be exec produced by Sean Cunningham, who created the FRIDAY THE 13TH film series. ☺ With the blessing of comic creator J. O'Barr, rocker Rob Zombie (of White Zombie) will write and direct THE CROW: 2037. □

## Modesty Blazes Again

by Alan Jones

More than thirty years after director Joseph Losey's 1966 Pop Art classic, MODESTY BLAISE, the long-rumored remake has finally been announced. To be directed by French *enfant terrible* Luc Besson, whose recent science-fiction fantasy THE FIFTH ELEMENT defied lousy reviews to become an international blockbuster, the new film will star Natasha Henstridge, currently filming SPECIES II.

The original Losey film, an attempt to combine kitsch with intellectual irony was a distinguished flop remembered more today for its high camp production design. The character Modesty Blaise remains the only serious female rival to James Bond, as popularized in a series of novels by Peter O'Donnell and in a long-running syndicated comic strip. A remake had been mooted at various junctures over the last ten years. Then Quentin Tarantino optioned the rights to several O'Donnell novels. In fact, the PULP FICTION director has claimed he's already directed the fourth Modesty novel—*A Taste For Death*—in his head. Along with the Tarantino connection came the prediction that director Roberto Rodriguez (FROM DUSK TILL DAWN) would helm the first in a proposed series. Apparently, Tarantino will retain a producing credit with Besson and is slated to direct at least one of the planned three sequels.

Besson could not be a more perfect director for MODESTY BLAISE. He particularly favors strong female leads like Milla Jovovich in THE FIFTH ELEMENT, Nathalie Portman in THE PROFESSIONAL and, especially, Anne Parillaud in LA FEMME NIKITA. The latter film, remade starring Bridget Fonda as POINT OF NO RETURN by director John Badham, could almost be viewed in terms of a Gallic Modesty Blaise.

No casting has been announced yet as regards Modesty's side kick Willie Garvin, played by Terence Stamp in the Losey original, although the names of Tim Roth and Sean Pertwee have been mentioned (EVENT HORIZON). It's hoped the new MODESTY BLAISE will be in theaters by Christmas 1998. □



# A BUG'S LIFE

*Pixar's next pic is about an animated ant named Flick.*

by Lawrence French

Pixar, the computer graphics studio that created a milestone in animation history with TOY STORY, the world's first computer graphics animation feature, has extended its three-picture deal with Walt Disney Studios. Under the revised agreement, a total of five new computer animation features will be produced by the company over the next ten years. The first will be A BUG'S LIFE (formerly BUGS), to be co-directed by John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton. The storyline is derived from Aesop's fable of the Grasshopper and the Ant, as well as Akira Kurosawa's THE SEVEN SAMURAI. It centers on a colony of ants storing their food for the winter, who find themselves continually under attack by marauding grasshoppers. Tiring of the hungry bandits, an ant named Flick journeys from his anthill to enlist the aid of professional soldiers but instead ends up hiring an out-of-work flea circus. Lasseter and his story team (including TOY STORY alumni Joe Ranft and Andrew Stanton) have already spent two years working on ideas for the film. Screenwriters Bob Shaw and Don McEnery, who co-wrote HERCULES for Disney, are contributing to the final script.

"We're in the thick of BUGS right now," reported Lasseter, "and our animators are doing some amazing work." Lasseter picked a



Pixar followed-up their hit film TOY STORY (above) with a direct-to-video sequel earlier this year. Their next feature film will be A BUGS LIFE.

story dealing with insects, knowing they would work extremely well in computer animation, as well as provide Pixar's technical wizards with some new challenges. "I always try to choose subject matter that lends itself to the medium," he explained. "In a way, it's a subconscious thing. Our main focus is on the story and the characters, but the subject matter is always chosen with the medium in mind. We also like to push the boundaries of the medium, so sometimes when we start on a project, everything we want to do isn't even do-able yet! That means we have to develop the technical know-how to make it happen as we go along."

Lasseter pointed out that TOY STORY wouldn't have been nearly

as effective if the same story had been handled with regular, hand-drawn animation. "Part of the charm of TOY STORY," he said, "was taking these plastic manufactured toys and bringing them to life. CGI tends to make everything look plastic anyway, so why not have your main characters made of plastic? The dimensional quality of CGI and the fact that we could get all the different reflections and shading really helped to make the characters seem like toys. In hand-drawn animation, what would be the difference between a regular person walking around and a toy coming to life? There really isn't that much. Hand animating an Etch-a-Sketch coming to life wouldn't have

the same kind of impact as having an Etch-a-Sketch done in computer animation, because CGI seems more like the Etch-a-Sketch you knew and loved."

A BUG'S LIFE, which is due for release in November 1998, seems to be part of a recent trend of insect animation, following in the footsteps of films like JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH and JOE'S APARTMENT. Even Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks is jumping into the fray with a computer-animated film entitled ANTS, featuring the voice of Woody Allen as a neurotic ant. Lasseter acknowledges that there have been a lot of on-screen insects lately, claiming, "It's because the subject matter has such great potential in so many different ways. If you look back at the history of animation, there's been lots of different things that have been done with insects."

Lasseter will also serve as executive producer on a sequel to TOY STORY, which Disney will release direct-to-video, a la THE RETURN OF JAFAR. "Disney wanted to get it made within a certain time frame, and if we made it for theatrical release, we wouldn't be able to work on it until after BUGS," said Lasseter. "The entire original voice cast is returning, including Tom Hanks and Tim Allen. Ash Brannon, who was a supervising animator on TOY STORY, will be directing." □

## Obituaries

by Jay Stevenson

### Burgess Meredith

The memorable 88-year-old character actor died at his home on September 10. Although perhaps best known for his role as Micky the trainer in the ROCKY film, he also played the villainous Penguin in the BATMAN television series, and he made numerous other genre appearances, including four stints on THE TWILIGHT ZONE: "Time Enough at Last," "Mr. Dingle, the Strong," "The Obsolete Man," and "Printer's Devil." In the later, he played the Devil, a role he repeated for the feature film TORTURE GARDEN (1968), written by Robert Bloch and directed by Freddie Francis. His genre films include BATMAN (1966), BURNT OFFERINGS (1976), THE SENTINEL (1977), MAGIC and THE MANITOU (both 1978), WHEN TIME RAN OUT (1980), CLASH OF THE TITANS (1981), 1983's TWILIGHT ZONE—THE MOVIE (which he narrated, replacing the late Rod Serling), and SANTA CLAUS: THE MOVIE (1985).

### Elizabeth Brooks

The star of THE HOWLING (1980) died in September. Brooks was memorably malevolent as the vampish wolf-bitch who seduced Christopher Stone into becoming a werewolf in Joe Dante's comic horror film, which set a new standard for transformation effects. □

## Exorcist IV

Morgan Creek Productions (the company that financed THE EXORCIST III) has signed William Wisher (who co-wrote TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY with James Cameron) to write a fourth entry in the EXORCIST series, to be titled EXORCIST: THE BEGINNING. The new film is to be a prequel to director William Friedkin's 1973 blockbuster, based on the novel by William Peter Blatty. Wisher wants to tackle an allegedly unexplored part of the first movie: the first battle between Father Merrin (played by Max Von Sydow) and his demonic adversary, which took place in Africa decades before the events portrayed in THE EXORCIST. Apparently, no one at Morgan Creek has seen John Boorman's disastrous THE EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC, which already portrayed Merrin's first exorcism in flashback. □

## Production Starts



### STAR WARS: UNTITLED PREQUEL

This long-awaited project quietly started production on June 26 at Leavesden Studios in England; location work includes trips to Italy and Tunisia. After much speculation that Kenneth Branagh would be cast as the young Ben Kenobi, the cast includes Liam Neeson (DARKMAN), Ewan McGregor (TRAINSPOTTING), Natalie Portman (MARS ATTACKS), and Jake Lloyd. Executive producer George Lucas writes and directs. Special effects, naturally, are by ILM.



# MOUSE HUNT

## DreamWorks SKG's live-action TOM & JERRY.

On the set at Raleigh Studios in Hollywood, it is difficult to believe that DreamWorks SKG's MOUSE

HUNT is a comedy. A large staircase stretches up from the floor in a dizzying arc to a second-floor landing. The walls of the landing, painted a leaden grey, are peeling and chipped. The filthy, dun-colored staircase has banisters that are splintered and worn. The floor of the first landing is so pock-marked with holes it resembles a close-up of the surface of the moon. The cemetery-dismal lighting makes the entire set piece look like something out of Charles Addams' worst nightmare.

But MOUSE HUNT is indeed a comedy. Written by Adam Rifkin, produced by Alan Riche, Tony Ludwig and Bruce Cohen, and directed by Gore Verbinski, the film tells the story of two men, Ernie Smuntz (Nathan Lane) and his brother Lars (British comic actor Lee Evans.) Upon the death of their father, Ernie and Lars inherit his business and also his seemingly-abandoned mansion. Although a gothic monstrosity, the house turns out to have been built by a famous 19th-century architect, one that could have considerable value. A wealthy collector of houses offers the brothers a huge sum to buy the mansion, but Ernie insists on holding out for more money by selling the house at auction.

The brothers get to work renovating their home. Unbeknownst to them, however, they are being watched by the only permanent resident of the house, a cute and highly intelligent little mouse. Lars and Ernie try to catch and kill the mouse, but the use of traditional mousetraps fails miserably. The Smuntzes go to the local animal shelter and buy a monster cat, (aptly named Catzilla), but his attempts at mouse catching prove no more effective

*Preview by  
Mitch Persons*

than theirs. The brothers then hire a Ghostbusters-like exterminator, Caesar (Christopher Walken), but he too, fails.

The bizarre but ineffective antics of Caesar and Catzilla, and the further efforts of Ernie and Lars to rid themselves of the mouse, give the film an almost cartoonish quality. Producer Bruce Cohen, sitting at the foot of the massive staircase, admitted that this quality is just what the filmmakers wanted. "The goal here," he said, "is to make a film that is loaded with TOM AND JERRY-type sequences but to do it with mostly live action, with a real cat and a real mouse. Take the scene that's being shot over on the next set. We have Catzilla chasing the mouse all over the living room. We see the two enemies as they knock over furniture, tear up a rug, and generally make the room a shambles. Or the piece that's being set up now," he added, indicating the staircase: "We previously did a segment where the mouse runs up the stairs and into a hallway, followed by Catzilla. Before the cat can take off down the hallway, he knocks over a paint can. What we're going to see here is the can tumbling down the stairs, covering the staircase in paint. Later on,

Brothers Lars (Lee Evans, left) and Ernie (Nathan Lane) Smuntz trap themselves into a corner while trying to catch a persistent mouse.



Ernie Smuntz (Nathan Lane) and "Friend" in DreamWorks Pictures MOUSE HUNT.

there's a scene where the mouse and cat run back down the stairs. As they do, they leave little painted footprints all over.

"Strangely enough," Cohen continued, "although we are trying for a cartoon quality here, we never actually use animated figures. For some of the more complex mouse maneuvers, we use a CG mouse or an animatronic mouse in addition to the live one. The cat is either live or animatronic. Fortunately, our director, Gore Verbinski, has had a great deal of experience with animatronics, so the results are going to look pretty impressive."

Gore Verbinski's experience with animatronic animals hit its peak with several successful Budweiser "Frog" commercials. MOUSE HUNT is his first venture into feature film making. This day, Verbinski is hard at work shooting inserts. "What we're doing," he said, "is bits and pieces left of the bits and pieces. We've got close-ups of the little mouse sniffing around a fireplace, turning a key, that sort of thing."

"It's amazing," said creature effects supervisor for the Stan Winston Studio, Shane Mahan, "how many people think of mice as just dirty little pests. I overheard Boone Narr saying something the other day that was pretty interesting. He said, 'Once people see this movie, and how endearing this mouse is, they'll never, ever set another mousetrap in their life. I predict that the mouse is going to be the Pet of '98!'" □



# TOMORROW NEVER DIES

**Pierce Brosnan returns as James Bond, battling British baddie Jonathan Pryce.**

*By Alan Jones*

A megalomaniacal media mogul tries to trigger a third world war in order to boost TV ratings in the 18th James Bond adventure, *TOMORROW NEVER DIES*. Producers Michael Wilson and Barbara Broccoli are carrying on the family tradition founded by the late Cubby Broccoli 35 years ago with *DOCTOR NO*, and Pierce Brosnan returns for his second outing as Ian Fleming's sophisticated spy, having kick-started series with *GOLDENEYE*, which took a world-wide boxoffice gross of over \$350 million—nearly twice the total of any previous Bond movie.

The \$60 million *TOMORROW NEVER DIES* started shooting on April 1, 1997. Director Roger Spottiswoode said, "I'd met the Broccoli family years before about the possibility of making one of the [prior Bond] Timothy Dalton episodes, and they approached me August 1996 with a script the studio [MGM/UA] didn't want to make, be-

cause the story was centered around the Hong Kong changeover from British to Chinese rule. The film would have to have opened in May to have any immediacy, and there was no way we could have made the picture in that short space of time. So they had to radically alter the whole concept. The villain stayed in the story, but that was all."

The new script, written by Bruce Feirstein with additional material by Daniel Petrie Jr., still wasn't ready by the start date, yet Bond 18 (the project's pre-production code name) went into production anyway. Pierce Brosnan remarked, "The studio wanted the film; they wanted it yesterday, so we went out of the gates with it not exactly in the finest of shape. The story was there...but making it has been a bit like pulling teeth."

Jonathan Pryce—who plays the villainous Elliot Carver, owner of the global newspaper *Tomorrow* (circulation 100 million) and satellite systems able to access every TV set on Earth—noted, "There has

been a lot of press misrepresentation about what was happening on the film. I suppose that's bound to happen with such a high profile enterprise. But daily script rewrites are something that happens on most films. What happened here is that the script I originally saw and agreed to do had undergone numerous changes and not for the better. But everyone realized it had gone off course a little—Spottiswoode, the producers, Pierce—not just me. It occurred because they were trying to deal with so many other exciting elements in the film that it had a knock-on effect with my character. When Bruce Feirstein came back on board, rather than rewriting, he put back everything to do with Elliot because I was his invention. He was the one with all the pertinent knowledge about that kind of man, having worked in journalism for so many years. Nothing was the battle, or cause of any antagonism, the press kept describing."

*TOMORROW NEVER DIES* had actually started filming in February, in the snow fields of the French Pyrenees. That's where the trademark Bond pre-credits stunt sequence had been shot by the second unit, showing Bond at the Khyber Pass stealing a nuclear-equipped plane from black market arms dealers. Rivaling this for excitement are two other major stunts: a heart-stopping motorcycle chase across the flimsy rooftops of a South East Asian city ending in a leap over a helicopter, and a car chase in which Bond uses a remote control to guide the vehicle from the back seat.

Other extensive location work was carried out in Thailand, Mexico, Hamburg, and Florida, with interiors shot at Pinewood's 007 sound stage and at the new Eon Productions studio facility at Frogmore in London's north west suburbs. Brosnan laughed, "We have this habit of spawning new studios. We couldn't use Leavesden again, where we filmed *GOLDENEYE*, because *STAR WARS* moved in. So we found another similar set up. I was thrilled to be

Brosnan's Bond teams up with a Chinese agent played by martial arts star Michelle Yeoh (*SUPERCOP*).







Top: Bond greets former flame Mrs Carver (LOIS AND CLARKE's Teri Hatcher), the wife of villainous media mogul Elliot Carver. Right: Michelle Yeoh co-stars as Chinese External Security agent, Wai Lin.



filming in the 007 stage at Pinewood—a little bit of Bond history there, as it's the first time I've done that."

Starring alongside Brosnan and Pryce in the hi-tech, high-octane film are Michelle Yeoh (a.k.a. Kahn); Teri Hatcher (LOIS & CLARK) as Paris Carver, who shares a past with Bond; Ricky Jay, as a techno-terrorist; and Gotz Otto, as Carver's servant Stamper, a giant of a man in whom the treacherous twins of pain and pleasure have been genetically reversed.

Returning to the Bond series are Dame Judi Dench as M, Samantha Bond as Monypenny, Joe Don Baker as Jack Wade, and Desmond Llewelyn as Q. This time out, Q's gadgets are mainly incorporated into Bond's BMW 750, although his Omega watch still has its fair share of nifty uses. Behind the scenes, production designer Allan Cameron (STARSHIP TROOPERS) and director of photography Robert Elswitt are giving director Spottiswoode the darker atmosphere he feels is the right choice for a late '90s Bond movie.

David Arnold is composing the music after scoring the last two Roland Emmerich movies STARGATE and INDEPENDENCE DAY. In fact, Arnold was working on an album of Bond themes sung by contemporary artists when he was offered the assignment. The theme song is by Sheryl Crow who had a major hit in 1994 with "All I want to Do." "I asked if I could sing it," said Jonathan Pryce, star of the film version of EVITA, the hit stage musical *Miss Saigon*, and the blockbuster revival of *Oliver!* "But I was told I wasn't chart material," he sighed.

Michelle Yeoh plays Wai

Lin, agent of the People's External Security Force in Beijing, who joins forces with Bond to stop Carver's plan to manufacture the news and challenge the course of history. Yeoh is the most prominent female performer in the almost exclusively male Asian action genre thanks to such Hong Kong classics as TAI CHI MASTER and THE HEROIC TRIO. The co-star of Jackie Chan's SUPERCOP said, "The producer wanted someone who was on a par with Bond, a woman of the '90s. You could see they were edging towards that with Famke Janssen and Izabella Scorupco in GOLDENEYE. They were much stronger than your average Bond Girl. Now they've gone all the way. I'm a female version of Bond, and the only one of his leading ladies to get her own fight sequence. It's never happened before."

The actress added, "I was looking for the right part in a Hollywood movie that would show my abilities, as I do every style of fight skill which I incorporate with my dance experience. I've worked very hard to

get where I am, and being chosen for the part of Wai Lin is a tremendous recognition of my talents. I brought in my own Hong Kong stunt coordinator, and the producers were wise enough to capitalize on my talents and write in extra fight scenes for me to do. I've contributed to the movie in ways all the other Bond Girls haven't and that's a fabulous thrill."

"Michelle was one of my choices for TOMORROW NEVER DIES," remarked director Spottiswoode. The AIR AMERICA director continued, "My nephew is a big fan of her work and insisted I see her before we embarked on the casting process. I didn't want voluptuous babes draped everywhere and wanted Bond to have a proper match for a change; someone strong, smart, able, powerful, and certainly not sexual. Her confidence and courage in the role has been amazing and she's added to the edginess and grit I want this episode to highlight."

Spottiswoode added, "The Bond movies had drifted off into this fantasy world. Martin Campbell had brought back a certain edginess to the series when he directed GOLDENEYE, but I wanted to go even further with the—not somber tone exactly—more noirish, moody feel. Obviously, Bond is always going to exist in a fantasy landscape, but I felt they had gone too far down that road. I much prefer a strong reality base than the retro-'60s feel the latter episodes have had. I want to bring Bond into the heightened reality world other recent action adventures have successfully existed in." □

The new Bond flick features the action audiences have come to expect, plus a "more noirish, moody feel," according to the director Roger Spottiswoode.





# F

## Disney updates

By Patrick Legare

Completed and heading towards a Thanksgiving 1997 release is Disney's **FLUBBER**, an "updating" of their classic 1961 Robert Stevenson hit, **THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR**. "I don't think of it as a remake," said director Les Mayfield. "I understand that it is, but I think it's so original—it truly deserves to have its own label and title."

The original starred Fred MacMurray as a slightly batty scientist whose absorption in his work keeps making him forget to show up for his wedding. MacMurray's light comical performance underlies a genuinely interesting plot about his discovery of a flying rubber substance that defies gravity. He calls it "flubber" and enlists it as an aid to win back his beleaguered fiancée by making cars fly and giving a basketball team an unbelievable "jump" shot. Of course, the shape-shifting goop's loot po-



Top: the new Flubber is achieved with CGI, allowing for greater activity on the part of the strange substance. Middle: Robin Williams' absent-minded professor has a flying robot assistant, rather than the dog of the original. Bottom and right: filming a blue screen shot of Williams' flying car.



tential sets off a cunning businessman and every branch of the armed services all of whom want to get their hands on it.

**FLUBBER**, from a script by co-producer John Hughes (**101 DALMATIANS**), stars comedian Robin Williams as Professor Philip Brainard. Williams' casting immediately spells a charged difference from the subtle comedic effort MacMurray brought to the original. Ted Levine (**SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**) and Wil Wheaton (**STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION**) co-star. Dean Cundey (**JURASSIC PARK**) photographed the film, and



# FLUBBER

## THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR, with CGI FX.

Danny Elfman (MEN IN BLACK) provides the music. Visual effects by ILM were supervised by Tom Bertino.

Hughes and Mayfield brought many changes to the new film, though the plot will echo many elements, such as the memorable basketball game and flying Model-T scenes, which has been changed to a 1963 Ford Thunderbird. Hughes' adaptation replaces the professor's faithful dog with a flying female robot named Weebo, shifts the setting from East to the West coast, and bumps up the professor's girlfriend (played by Marcia Gay Harden) in job status from the college's secretary to its president.

The biggest change, however, is shift in focus of the film

from the professor to his creation: Flubber. The original featured simply a blob-like goo, but ILM reintroduces Flubber as the main event in the remake, hence the film's title change. "I just looked at the board, we're up to 632 effects shots," related the 37-year-old Mayfield. "It's the biggest 'little' movie ever made." Though Disney would not release budgetary figures, the film is likely in the \$50 to \$60 million dollar range and was shot on location in San Francisco over the course of three and a half months. Said Mayfield, "It's not a huge budget and it's not a modest budget. It's an appropriate budget to deliver the entertainment we're after."

Prior to working with Hughes on a bland 1994 remake of the revered 1947 Christmas classic, MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET, Mayfield's feature directorial debut was 1992's ENCINO MAN for Disney starring a less-than-hilarious Pauly Shore. It was a long way from FLUBBER and the comic genius of Robin Williams. "You can't ask for anything more as a director than to have an actor willing to explore," Mayfield explained. "Not to take anything away from Pauly. Pauly was a young actor then; I don't know what he's like now, but with Robin there's a method and a plot behind everything and that's what I think makes him brilliant." Mayfield added, "He's done 24 some odd films and never have we seen him



Les Mayfield (MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET) directs Robin Williams in FLUBBER, Disney's updated remake of THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR.

do the physical comedy that he's done for us in FLUBBER. When he commits to a project, he commits heart, body and soul."

For the absent-minded remake, Berkeley post-doctoral chemistry grad Jeff Cruzan was hired as Williams' science coach as well as being the person in charge of making the lab equipment appear realistic. He also was charged with making certain the scientific details were correct even if a metastable substance like flubber (which would break most of the laws of physics) could not be real.

For Marcia Harden, her role in FLUBBER is an advanced updating of the flitting fiancée played by Nancy Olson (who makes a cameo in the new film). "I think she was more appropriate to the times," Harden said of her character, Sara. "America's moved on in the way we think about work and position and things like that. You see, I'm much more of a diplomat than to say 'My character's gonna be smarter than Nancy Olson's.'"

Still, Sara is looking forward to achieving traditional goals such as marriage and children. Unfortunately, her suitor is a man so consumed by his work that he forgets his wedding. "I suspect I would behave differently," the married Harden carefully answers when asked if she could forgive a man who had missed two wedding dates so he could tinker with his chemistry set. "For-

tunately, I wasn't playing myself. I didn't want her to be hands on her hips, tapping her toe, shaking her finger in his face saying, 'Boy, you better behave yourself!' I wanted her to be more than that. I think to fall in love with such a whimsical, wild, wonderful science man as the professor, that she had to have her own wild hair."

Harden's most comical ventures on the set involved her being rigged to a giant leather strap in order for her to appear to be jumping as a result of the flubber. For this reason, space, especially height, was of the essence for the filmmakers, and they found it at the Treasure Island naval base. Building Three on the base measured in at nearly 400 feet long, 270 feet

wide and had a 65 foot underside, according to production designer Andrew McAlpine in the Disney press material. He created a 2,500 seat basketball arena, the team's locker room, the interior of the Hoenicker mansion and Brainard's laboratory in the 90,000 square feet available.

FLUBBER will face tough competition for a youth audience during the hot holiday season that will also feature 20th Century-Fox's premiere animated picture, ANASTASIA. This would seem to suggest that Mayfield would be working under a microscope with constant pressures from the front office, but the director says that's not so. "When working with John [Hughes] and under his production banner, there's a great freedom from that. They trust him to deliver the goods," he explained. "I was only given opportunities by Disney. Joe Ross introduced us to Robin Williams, who obviously became part of the movie and also, most recently, brought Danny Elfman into the movie. That's the kind of momentum the film has. When you have the Thanksgiving Day slot that has been occupied by, last year [101] DALMATIANS, the year before by TOY STORY, by MRS. DOUBTFIRE before that, it's a very big slot, and you have to hit the ball. The pressure is there, but I think they trust John and I think John trusts me. I just hope it all works out. I'm very proud of the film." □



# ALIEN 4: RESURRECTION

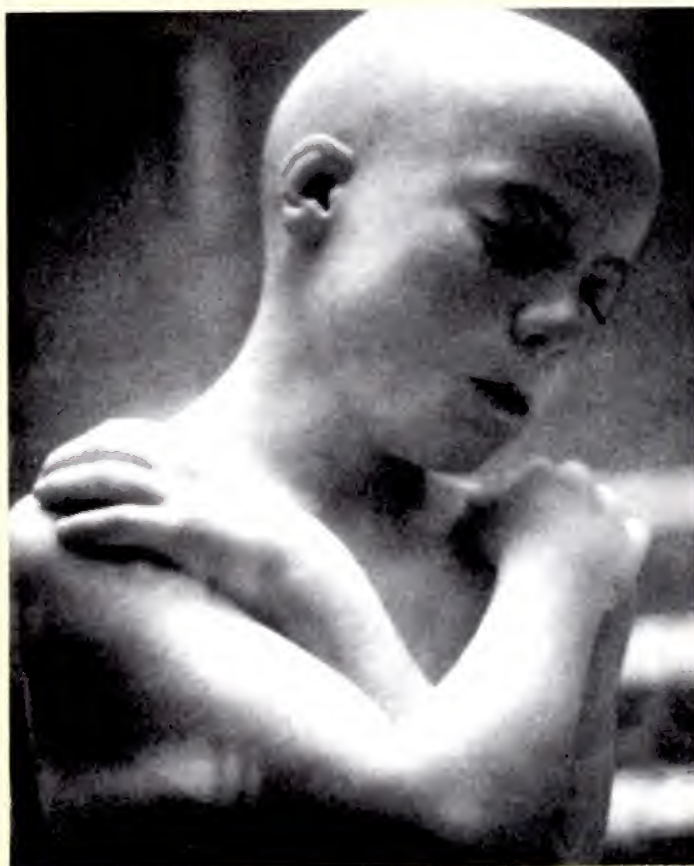
**Scripter Joss Whedon pumps some SPEED into the heart of a dying franchise.**

By Dale Kutzera

She's dead, right? Ripley in ALIEN<sup>3</sup>. Even worse, the film itself was a boxoffice disappointment that attracted the most negative reviews of the series. The macabre gothic tension of the first film, directed by Ridley Scott, and the lock-and-load combat of James Cameron's follow-up were nowhere to be found—replaced by a murky narrative and the stylish images of director David Fincher (SEVEN). If the death of Ripley didn't put a nail in the series, then the poor reaction to this third film certainly did.

How can this franchise possibly revive? Jorge Saralegui asked himself the same question when he joined 20th Century-Fox as a junior creative executive in 1991. This fall, when ALIEN: RESURRECTION hits the screens, Saralegui's ingenuity and tenacity will have provided an answer. Said Saralegui, "I wanted to work on ALIEN because I loved the franchise. It is one of those things I saw as a civilian—before entering the film business—and I didn't want to let it die. I couldn't believe that I would have the opportunity to revive something that I loved as a fan."

Though 20th Century-Fox never officially ruled out a fourth ALIEN film, no one was actively developing such a project. Saralegui was working on other properties, including an action script called SPEED, but that film was still years away from establishing him. Several ideas had been circulated to bring back the alien creature, originally designed by H.R. Giger. One notion was to marry this icon of horror with the alien hunters from the PREDATOR films. Although this teaming proved to be a hit series of comic books from Dark Horse, Saralegui felt that a filmic pairing would diminish the integrity of the ALIEN franchise. "I've always resisted that," he said. "It's a good idea from a commercial point of view, but I can't imagine the ALIEN series continuing after you make an ALIEN-



In ALIEN: RESURRECTION, clandestine military operation clones Ripley from tissue samples taken in ALIEN 3.

PREDATOR story. I could be wrong, but that is my gut feeling. If you turn it into a monster movie, you can't go back."

Ultimately, Saralegui developed his own idea for continuing the series. The concept involved Newt as a grown woman, who later learns she was cloned by the Company to extract alien DNA. "You realize eventually who she is, but you don't know she's a clone. There is an outbreak of aliens, and they send her after them. She discovers she is a clone and that the Company lied to her. In effect, she takes on Ripley's mantle. She chooses to go that the hard way of a hero."

Saralegui was asked to find a writer and prepare a treatment. He called on a young man whose first feature script, BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, had just been produced. "Joss Whedon was at the very beginning of his career," said Saralegui. "He had yet to [re]write SPEED, which he did about two months later. I had no idea if he liked ALIEN or not, but 'Buffy' is just

like my idea of Newt: she is somebody who has been raised in a way that some may find improper—a very shallow cheerleader—and is suddenly told, 'You are not what you think you are. You're a special person whose purpose is to battle evil that will never be conquered. In order for you to do it you have to reject everything you've had—your friends, family, bosses—and go out on your own on this lonely hero's path.'"

It so happened that Whedon loved the ALIEN films. His 34-page treatment sufficiently impressed Fox executives so that he was signed on to complete a script. Whedon and Saralegui worked on the project throughout the production of SPEED and during Whedon's work on TOY STORY and his on-set contributions to WATERWORLD. Much of this initial work was tossed out, however, when it was proposed that Sigourney Weaver be included in the film. Saralegui had based his development of the new storyline on the understanding that Weaver did not want to reprise the character of Ripley. "I had heard second-hand that Sigourney Weaver was very much in favor of dying in that [third] movie," said Saralegui. "She felt it was a good ending to that character. No studio would ever come up with that idea, because it would end the series. Then the question came back from on high: Should you be doing this with Ripley? So we spoke with Sigourney, and her feeling was that there was nowhere else for that character to go, and she didn't want to turn it into a typical franchise. Ripley died to preserve the integrity of the franchise and not turn it into 'The Adventures of Ripley.'"

"She was open to the idea of another one, but only if it took Ripley someplace new. She had never compromised and wasn't going to start now," continued Saralegui, who, with Whedon, then faced the daunting task of resurrecting Ripley. "Obviously it involves cloning. Cloning explains that she's back, but that is not enough to make





The cloned Ripley also contains DNA from the alien embryo in ALIEN 3. Here, she communes with her alien "relative."

[Weaver] think it's a new character. So then we came up with the aspects of her apart from being a clone. She has alien DNA in her. It basically makes her a new being. Imagine you wake up as a clone—never mind dealing with that mind-blower—but you also have alien DNA and you are changing. You are only a few weeks or months old. It is open ended. You don't know if the day after this story ends she is going to develop a second tongue, or if on an emotional level, the alien DNA is going to make her violent. It's a character that has so much to be explored—all the issues of humanity. Sigourney really liked this, because it is actually a whole new person."

The new direction for the film took shape during frequent brainstorming meetings between Whedon and Saralegui. "There was a creative back and forth with Jorge," said Whedon. "He's the only one working on this longer than I have and some of the coolest sequences came from our interplay. I was horribly daunted. I wanted to write something worthy."

The action-packed adventure of the ALIEN: RESURRECTION screenplay is clearly an effort to return the franchise to the intensity of Cameron's second film. Two hundred years after the third film, Ripley awakens to find herself in the laboratory of a military spaceship with a number 8 tattooed on her arm. She learns she has been cloned from tissue samples taken in the prison infirmary of the third film. The alien genetic code she carried was separated from her own to create an alien clone as well. Though the omnipotent company Weyland Yutani no longer exists ("They went under decades ago," one character deadpans, "bought out by Wal-Mart."),

clandestine military experiments with the aliens are about to commence. Of course, the multiplying aliens have other plans, and break free, beginning a non-stop adventure akin to POSEIDON ADVENTURE as Ripley and a rag-tag gang of traders make their way from one end of the ship to their escape vessel on the other side.

Whedon calls the script the hardest he's ever written, and even resorted to using labeled chess pieces to keep track of the many characters. "I wanted colorful people around her. The third film lacked a Hudson and the Michael Behn character, and you want to create that interplay. You want to play their reactions to her," Whedon explained, adding, "I went through various ideas for characters. Making up names is a

very important part. And finding people that have a little something that distinguishes them in the way they speak and behave, but not clichés. There are certain stereotypes you want to stay away from, but other icons you want to have. I charted when each dies and at one point had a character with three death scenes who was then alive at the end. I couldn't figure out how to kill the poor guy."

Along for the ride is Winona Ryder as Call, a suspicious, trash-talking space mechanic with a secret of her own. The addition of Ryder to the cast made Whedon's "jaw shatter. The character is young and idealistic, and she's got a potty-mouth. There is a freshness that contrasts with Ripley, who has been through everything."

Helming the film is Frenchman Jean-Pierre Jeunet (DELICATESSEN, THE CITY OF LOST CHILDREN). "We did

want a distinct talent," said Saralegui, who explained that selecting a relative unknown was a given, because established directors see no upside to following in the footsteps of Ridley Scott and James Cameron. Saralegui added, "There were some slim pickins in that sense. How many guys are there who haven't worked at this level, but that you could trust to make a film like this? Jeane-Pierre, at first glance, may seem way beyond the pale. We thought he was talented, but if he had said one thing that threw us off, we would have backed off. But he was very straight-forward, very smart about the script. He told us some ideas he had and was very direct in terms of what he thought he could do and would not know how to do,

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The new Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) squares off against a suspicious Call (Winona Ryder).





# MORTAL KOMBAT

## The no-holds-barred sequel promises all out

By Craig Reid

**MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION** comes to a theater near you on November 21st, 1997, brought to you in living color by producer Larry Kasanoff and completed by director John Leonetti on a budget under \$35 million (\$2.5-million under projection) and 75 days of bugs, sweat, and tears (ten days under scheduled).

This time out, a cackle of courageous combatants known as the Chosen Ones must survive yet another bout with an unscrupulous warlord bent on merging his Dante-esque domain with that poor third planet from the sun that has been threatened to be overrun, de-

stroyed or invaded more times this year than any other. Shao Kahn (Brian Thompson), the recreant ruler over this dark and desolate realm known as Outworld, has threatened the sacred laws of the Mortal Kombat tournament by ripping a portal in the fabric of the universe between Outworld and Earth. Determined to unite the two dimensions and claim the planet as his own, Shao Kahn dispatches his terrifying extermination squads to conquer humanity.

Kahn's Army of Darkness features a menagerie of marauding misfits: Sindel (Musetta Vander), once a beautiful queen, now a ghastly vision of living death; Sheeva (Marjean Holden), a towering, four-armed female fighting fanatic; Mileena (Dana Lynn Hee); Motaro (Deron McBee), a monstrous Centaur; and Ermac, the mysterious red Ninja and master of telekinetic powers.

Naturally, humanity's only hope lies with a handful of Earthly warriors: Liu Kang (Robin Shou), the champion who defeated the evil sorcerer Shang Tsung in **MORTAL KOMBAT**; Rayden (James Remar), an Immortal who leads the warriors into battle; Kitana (Talisa Soto), a beautiful, 10,000 year old princess from another dimension; Sonya Blade (Sandra Hess), a police officer and Earth's fiercest female; Johnny Cage (Chris Conrad), a former actor who discovered true courage through his death-defying battles in Outworld.

Helping our gallant combatants are



Though striving for more elaborate martial arts sequences, the new film also throws in a female mud wrestling scene for Sonya Blade (Sandra Hess, right).

Sonya's law enforcement partner, Jax (Red Williams); Jade (Siberian Eskimo Irina Pantaeva), a beautiful refugee from Outworld; and the Native American sorcerer Nightwolf (Litefoot). This newly forged family of fighters must face the awesome task of stopping Shao Kahn and his ruthless army from consuming the planet.

Said first-time director Leonetti, "Even though I have grown up in this business, I was still amazed at how inundating it was. As a director you have to answer all these questions from every department. But it is the most fun I have ever had professionally, and I think I'm pretty damn natural at it. I know how to shoot action; I am sensitive to story; and I love working with actors. There was a little trepidation working with the actors in the beginning because I have never been on the spot before. But ultimately, I loved it. It's easy for me to maintain spirit and positive energy and I love that."

"One of the toughest and most challenging aspects of this film was the conditions," he added. "More people got sick on this film than on any other of my career. A lot of people got pneumonia. I had it, but I never missed a day of work. Many people were in the hospital. Even my brother Matt, who was the DP—which was the coolest thing, being together on this film—a man who has never missed a day of shooting in thirty some years, missed two days of shooting in our movie. But my god this movie is beautiful"

With stories like this no wonder producer Kasanoff hasn't been bitten by the bug to direct. He said, "You know, I am just not interested. I love being a producer, and besides, I am involved in everything in the movie from script approval, writing [along with screenwriters Brent Friedman and Bryce Zabel], casting, costuming, fight choreography, and special effects. Although I did direct some second unit."

So what attracted Kasanoff to the MK franchise? "I have always been interested in making a movie that combined martial arts and science fiction, my two favorite things. I love martial art movies from Hong Kong. But while the martial arts are

good, the stories and production values lag behind typical Hollywood standards. **MORTAL KOMBAT** was that combination of martial arts and sci-fi that I loved."

Anyone who has seen the game, knows that "MK" the movie lacked the massive bloodletting, hearts yanked from the chest, involuntary spine removals, and humans converted into skeletons hurled into pits. What about MK-A? Kasanoff pointed out, "You must understand, *Mortal Kombat* is not the only graphically violent video game. It is the first graphically violent video game to become such a phenomena, so it got a lot of press. I didn't make the film graphically violent, because that was not the kind of movie I wanted to make. It was not because I was running from the violence or was scared of it. Graphic violence isn't new. You have seen Jason and Freddie. What I wanted to do, in my theory of combining martial arts and science fiction, was great fights where the coup d'etat move is a special effect, because nobody (in American film) has ever seen it before. That is why I did it. It gave things that you never expected, and [that's] why I think **MORTAL KOMBAT** was successful. Now for **ANNIHILATION**, what I want is more stunning locations, a more integral plot, more advanced 3-D special effects, more beautiful fighting women. It's everything I wanted to do in **MORTAL KOMBAT** but budget or technology did not allow."

Contrary to an earlier interview in *CFQ*,



# AT 2

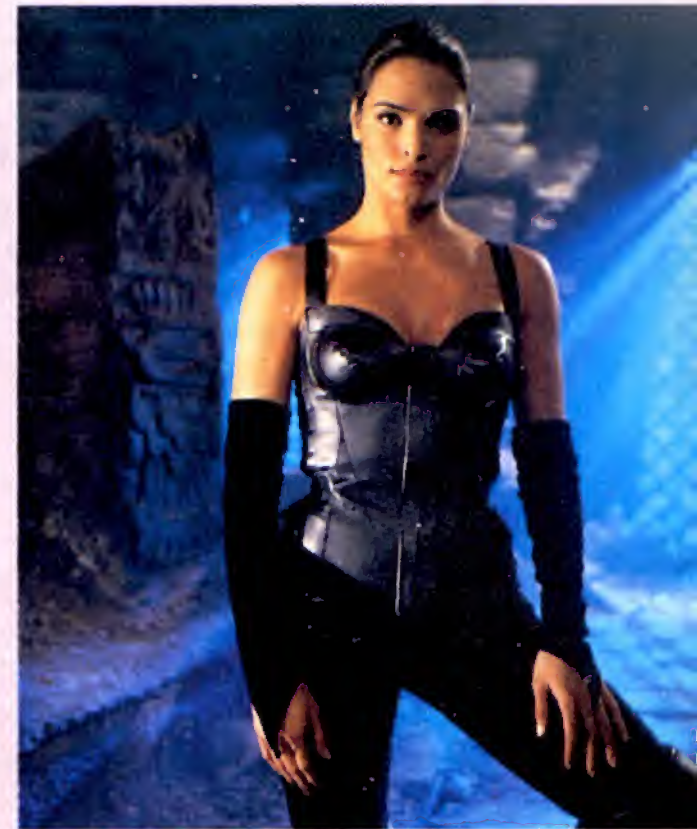
## annihilation.

Kasanoff affirmed that "The film is not more sexual. Basically, I took the first movie and rated everything excellent, good, fair, and poor. Everything below excellent, I threw out and increased everything that was excellent." (The female aspect of MK must have been considered excellent.)

If not sexual, perhaps slightly erotic? Leonetti inserted, "Maybe to a degree. It's subtle. The costumes are pretty nice to look at, and there is a mud wrestling fight between Sonya and Mileena. Yesterday, we were going back over the music deciding on what tune to use during this scene. On one hand we wanted something fun, something that is Tropicana or a strip club because the boys and guys would dig that. But on the other hand I think I am going with something a bit more hard-edged. It is the most brutal women fight I have seen. It is still sexy enough, but there is a reality between a really cool chick fight and a little bit of mud wrestling as well."

Fans will notice that Lynden Ashby (as Johnny Cage) and Bridgette Wilson (as Sonya Blade) have been replaced. Kasanoff said, "Lynden was working on a new TV show ["Spy Game" on which yours truly was a fight choreographer]. For Bridgette, it was a very hard decision, but we wanted a slightly different take on her character, and we found someone who had that take and could do what we envisioned."

So what does ANNIHILATION have in store for us? Said Leonetti, "MORTAL KOMBAT was different because it took place in a tournament situation; in this film there are no rules. Shao Kahn decides to cheat, come down and open up a portal from Outworld to Earth. So it's an adventure as opposed to a ring." Leonetti's final words really hit home. "I really do believe what the films says: that if you believe in yourself more than you ever imagined, you can accomplish way more than you can imagine. And beyond that, the paradox of the martial arts is that you train to be the best, but you never want to fight. What is most interesting about the mythology of MORTAL KOMBAT is that it is not a film about death but a film about life and the preservation of life. It's not about fighting but about fortifying the person inside you." □



Top: Outworld's army of masked fighters is led by Sindel (Musetta Vander) and Sheeva (Marjean Holden). Mid-left: Liu Khang (Robin Shou) is comforted by Jade (Irina Pantaeva). Mid-right: Talisa Soto returns as the 10,000-year-old Princess Kitana. Below: The character of Johnny Cage takes on Outworld opponents.







**Top: the Earth armada approaches the planet Klendathu, effects by Sony Imageworks. Below: the aftermath of destruction in Buenos, targeted with with an asteroid by the alien arachnid enemy.**





# STARSHIP TROOPERS

**The ROBOCOP team brings Robert Heinlein's novel to the big screen.**

**P**aul Verhoeven—of ROBOCOP and TOTAL RECALL—may know how to give audiences all the rave-up blood 'n' guts they've plunked down their eight bucks for, but the smart moviegoer has to suspect that the Dutch director isn't about to let it rest there. This is, after all, the man who took ROBOCOP and turned what could have been a stainless steel DIRTY HARRY into a rumination on the question of identity; this is the same man who made TOTAL RECALL a wide-screen comic-book that wanted audiences to ponder the seductions of screen reality between all the blood-squibs.

Likewise, in TROOPERS, you'll get all the exploding spaceships, mass troop movements, and vicious alien bugs that you've been promised—having been handed \$100 million by the Sony brass, Verhoeven knows better than to stint on the stuff the popcorn-crunchers crave. But you're also going to get your nose tweaked a little bit, in the presentation of what some might consider the perfect, action-adventure world; in the suggestion that to get such a world, we might have to orient ourselves towards a political outlook that will have more than a few viewers twitching in their seats. In short, Verhoeven has decided to take on the inherent fascism of the action-film genre, and the result may be the wickedest flirtation with the Hero-with-a-Thousand-Faces since George Lucas quoted Leni Riefenstahl at the end of STAR WARS.

All this started in the winter of 1991, when ROBOCOP producer Jon Davison got

**BY DAN PERSONS**



The gung-ho Starship Troopers get a taste of battle: one of Phil Tippett's CGI bugs zooms in for an attack.





Each of the different castes of alien arachnids has its own functional, military design, including a battle-tank type that fries some unfortunate soldiers.

together with one of the writers of that landmark project, Ed Neumeier. "Ed and I wanted to do something else together after *ROBOCOP*," said Davison, "and he had an idea that he called *BUG HUNT*. I was interested because it sounded like something I could also work on with Phil Tippett—it was kind of a *LOST PATROL* with arachnids. The more we talked about it, the more the Heinlein novel *STARSHIP TROOPERS* came up."

No surprise there: the writer had developed his *BUG HUNT* concept in his teens, using *TROOPERS* as a template. Neumeier continued, "I said, 'I've been thinking we should do this big, giant war movie. It's got teenage romance, and there's a triangle in it, and it's

got this romantic, old-fashioned energy to it, but it's a movie about bugs.' We both kind-of knew that the digital revolution was coming, because we both had different ears to the ground and had heard about what was going on at ILM with *JURASSIC PARK*. And so there was kind of consensus of, 'Oh yeah, you can do that now.'"

Going under the assumption that rights to the novel had already been sold, Neumeier and Davison decided to approach the majors with Neumeier's generic *BUG HUNT* concept. Not the best approach, as it turned out: "We talked to TriStar," said Neumeier, "and had the most abysmal meeting of my career, except for one where I tried to strangle an executive. I told very much the structure of

the movie that now exists, but I told it so terribly that the executive there, Chris Lee, was quite correct in saying, 'I don't know what you're talking about. Get outta here.' So we went away with our tails between our legs.

"[Then] Jon did a very smart thing: he said, 'Well, you know, I'm gonna check and see if *Starship Troopers* is available. And it was. It was like you had the most beautiful girl in high-school, and no one had ever asked her out before. So, I was in a very remarkable position: at twelve years old I had said, 'I want to write *STARSHIP TROOPERS*'—probably like two or three-hundred other screenwriters along the line have done—and I was suddenly doing it. I took a big gulp, sat down, and essentially applied

all of the thoughts that I had had over the years to the adaptation, but with a real eye towards keeping true to the book."

**W**hat Neumeier did was to hold on to the essence of Heinlein's concepts, but strengthen character relationships to a level not present in the book. Rico, who plays as something of a loner in the novel (or at least is so preoccupied with life in the Mobile Infantry that the death of his mother during an alien attack only merits cursory mention), now has a well-defined set of friends and lovers. The Klendathu, meanwhile, have been transformed from the technologically advanced, insect society of the book to a more biologically-ori-

Although formidable, the enemy arachnids are not invulnerable. Below, a *Starship Troopers* defeats one of the beasties with a well-aimed grenade.





# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## ED NEUMEIER

### *Adapting and updating Heinlein for the screen.*

**T**he works of Robert Heinlein have rarely survived the transition from book to film, but screenwriter Ed Neumeier was dedicated to doing justice to the author with *STARSHIP TROOPERS*. Said Neumeier, who also serves as the film's co-producer, "I read the book when I was twelve years old, and like many people, it had a big impact on this boy. Along with my fantasies of one day being part of the movie business, I thought I would like to make a movie out of *Starship Troopers*. Over the years, I began to evolve, in my mind, a kind of other version of it. This version was a war movie on a mythic scale, like the book is, but it also had a much higher teen-age romance quotient—I think I even missed that as a twelve year-old. So this cooked in my mind for a number of years, but I was no longer thinking of it in terms of *Starship Troopers*; I was thinking in terms of a teen-age romance played against an outer-space war, because I assumed, '*Starship Troopers* has been owned by five thousand people, and I could never get it, and, you know, Jim Cameron kind-of did his own version of it. Maybe I can too.' And one day I run into John Davison, my producer from *ROBOCOP*, and he says, 'You know, we should get together again.'

After some false starts on a generic, "Bug Hunt" script, it was discovered that the rights to the *Starship Troopers* were available. With the novel purchased, Neumeier buckled down to telling the story he had been dreaming since adolescence. "I take an immense amount of time to write the first draft, seven or eight months, which convinces everybody I don't know what I'm doing. They

all read it, and Paul Verhoeven thinks it's cool enough that he decides to officially get involved, to develop the next draft. Paul and I work over another six months on the draft, and come up with a couple of new ideas, the most crucial one being put in by Paul. That was to make one of the male characters in the book, Dizzy Flores, into a female character, and combine her with a character that I had introduced in the high-school set-up, which was a girl quarterback. This led to a triangle which was in the first draft, but [it was now] two triangles that were playing off of each other. I think that was a really essential and interesting move."

Throughout this development process, Neumeier says he was well aware of the size of the task: "You know, many Heinlein devotees may feel that I have sort of blasphemed the good book. Yeah, it hit me, but I really felt like I was approaching the book with the perspective of someone who truly adored it, and that, as I went on, I knew, because I was by now a professional screenwriter, that a book and a movie are different. But I really hoped that if Heinlein were alive, he would see the movie and say, okay, first: 'The movie's different from the book,' but second, 'Hey, they at least made a very good advertisement for my work.' I don't know if we've succeeded, because we've had to drop some elements that are so associated with the book—the power armor. That might not go over with some of them, but still I feel like in some way we went out and in the best possible way captured an essence of the book and brought it into this particular time period, which is forty years after the book came out, when ideas about science fiction have moved a little bit."



New recruits enjoy a moment of *esprit de corps* before going into battle. Scripter Ed Neumeier put a "higher teen-age romance quotient" into Heinlein's story.

As for working with the legendary and demanding director Paul Verhoeven, Neumeier said their relationship survived because, in many regards, both of them were able to recognize their common goal: "I think to some extent we have shared sensibilities. Sometimes he'll say why it doesn't work for him, and other times he'll just say, 'It doesn't work for me!' Then we will look at it. Sometimes it goes back to the way it was, and sometimes a better idea comes."

"It's kind of a process of testing everything and seeing if it works. It's not always fun, but it often yields interesting results. I've worked with Paul on two movies and on about four scripts, and I don't feel, generally, that I lose. I think I always gain as a writer, in terms of the collaboration. That that's not always what you feel with directors. Sometimes you don't click, and I think Paul and I click. With Paul, it's all about the movies, and if you are able to put [personal concerns] outside yourself, then you have a chance at making something interesting."

While the film early on began shaping up as a big-budget, mega-production, Neumeier said the amount of money being thrown around didn't faze him at all. "It was almost amusing at times, particularly in production, when I just realized that it really didn't make any difference to me at all; I was just following the story and wanting to do it. My problem was that my ideas were not cheap, because they're fantasy ideas, and they require all this special kind of photography. One of these days, maybe I'll write something about two people in a room talking. But at the moment it's easier for me to put them on a starship."

One issue was whether the film

could take Heinlein's vision of workable, Fascist future and make it palatable for a modern audience. Neumeier, who brought a satiric twist to *ROBOCOP*'s dystopia with his *Newsbreak* interludes, was encouraged by Davison to take a similar tack with *TROOPERS*: "I seem to be very intrigued by the uses of media," the writer explained, "and so I was aided by Jon Davison: I was fed a steady diet of World War II propaganda pictures. I'm not talking about the *WHY WE FIGHT* series—although I looked at that stuff, too—I'm talking about movies the big studios made in the middle of the war, like *AIR FORCE* and *ACTION IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC*. I just said, 'That's what I want to do; I want to embrace that! I want to make a big, rootin'-tootin' propaganda film, but use it as a form of social satire.'

"It was very amusing to write in that way; it was a different way to look at things. It gave me a political context within which to look at the big war-action-spectacle film. That's why I did it. I think that Paul—having grown up in World War II and having seen and internalized Nazi propaganda and seen how that stuff was used by the East, by the West, by everybody—found it very amusing and kind of truthful, in a weird way—a *truthful* way to go after this sort of war spectacular. So what we really set about to do was to have fun with this kind of movie—not to make a straight, *INDEPENDENCE DAY* kind of thing, but to really make the kind of movie that dealt with these ideas [in a way that] would amuse us. And that's what I think you do when you're a filmmaker or you're a writer: you're just trying to amuse yourself."

Dan Persons



# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## PAUL VERHOEVEN

*Taking an ironic view of Heinlein's future fascism.*

**T**he way Paul Verhoeven sees it, even the Sojourner landing demonstrates how much the American public needs STARSHIP TROOPERS.

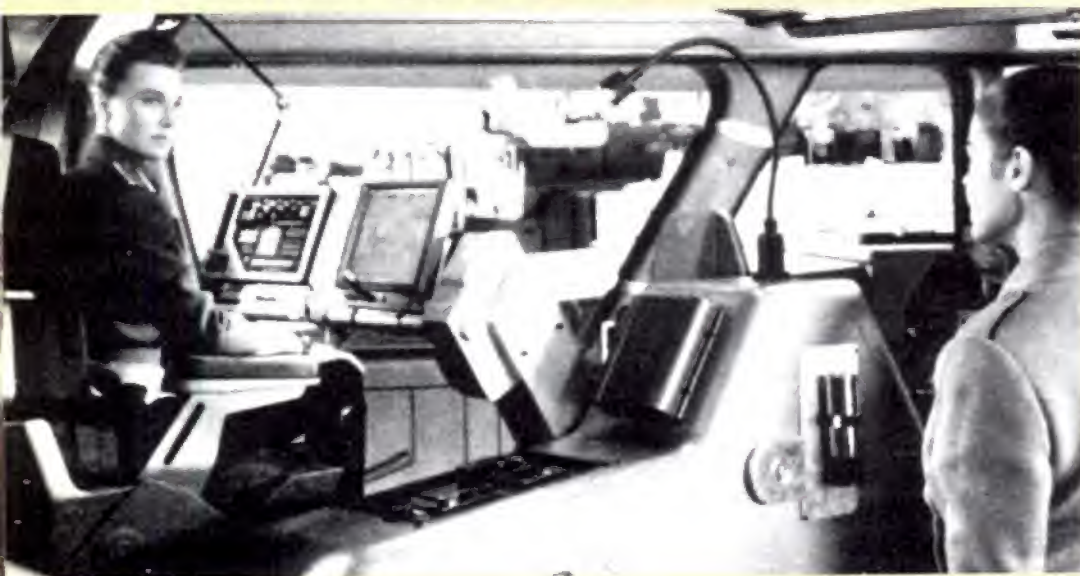
"When this little thing landed on Mars, one of the top leaders of the NASA project said, precisely, 'This proves that the U.S.A. is the master of the solar system.' That was in the newspapers. Isn't that ironic? Not for him—he believes that, really. Is it ironic for me? Yeah. Would I question it? Yes. Is it reasonable to put things in these kinds of power terms? I doubt that that's the way that humanity should develop. But it's part of our society.

The director knows from whence he speaks. Born in the Netherlands in 1938, Verhoeven has seen firsthand the perils of the fascist system. During his ascent to the upper echelons of the film elite, he has been listening to the echoes of fascism in a post-Cold War media that has been straining

to frame a new, national scourge. In his eyes, the ironies are obvious: "A common enemy will help us very much, won't it? It's like the United States is looking for a common enemy now and can't find it. In fact, if you look at the movie carefully, it is colonization by human beings that sets off the whole conflict. It's like one race, one species—the human race, in this case—is intruding into the territory of another, and that basically sets off the conflict. But that's also like normal politics, isn't it? In the movie we set up the conflict so that it's the other species who [is held] responsible. But if you look at it more closely, you can strongly doubt it. I think if you want to look at the movie that way, there's a lot of political impact, although because it's put in science-fiction terms and it's presented with a different species, it doesn't read like political commentary."

The Sony brass, having sunk \$100 million into STARSHIP

Verhoeven's take on a workable, Fascist future resulted in a clean, utilitarian look to the production design, emphasizing functional elements, not decoration.



Paul Verhoeven directs Denise Richards as hotshot pilot Carmen Ibanez.

TROOPERS, would probably be delighted if political commentary didn't enter into the thing at all. For Verhoeven, however, blockbuster success isn't claimed solely with big explosions and massive spaceships: "I always felt that the movie can only work when the big-event aspect and the characters work at the same strength. I feel that it should not be a special effects movie, only. We spend a lot of time in the beginning establishing the characters, and the insect invasion only starts halfway through the movie. So, really, time is spent establishing everybody, making them people you care about. Then after that, you get into the fight. I feel that that side of the movie—let's call it the character side, the human side—was as important as the big effects, big action stuff. And I think that if this movie works, it's because of the balance of the two."

What, then, led Verhoeven to choose so relative an unknown as Casper Van Dien for his lead trooper? "Because he seemed to be Johnny Rico," said the director. "I tested him for months. It was not like he comes in and that's him. It was, 'Yes, that's the type,' but it had to be clear that he could portray the character—the nuances, the vulnerability. Johnny goes into the military because of a young woman, not because he's so much into Federal service. So he's portrayed as having a vulnerability from the very beginning; his feelings for Carmen are really important to him. He had to be able to develop from a vulnerable high-school kid to an officer that at the end has the strength of character and the knowledge of a real offi-

cer. That's not so easy a curve."

With the grueling, ten week location shoots at Hell's Half Acre in Wyoming and the Badlands in South Dakota, Verhoeven seemed determined to make the production a mirror image of the military operations depicted on-screen. As with any major troop movement, planning was everything. Said Verhoeven, "If you compare the storyboards to what's on the screen, I think there would be a resemblance of eighty-five percent, perhaps even more. The storyboards were really our bible; we thought, *If we deviate from this, we are [doomed]*, because it becomes too complicated and nobody will know what should be done first. So we made clear from the very beginning that we would really shoot the storyboards, and we had storyboards of the whole movie—at least everything that had bugs or action or difficulties in it.

"Every morning, we'd go through these scenes. In fact, throughout the whole movie, we would all come to my trailer in the morning and go through the storyboards that were on the wall, and we would point out, 'This is the first shot; this is the second; this is the third shot. Then we go from here to here; then we skip that shot. You have to start preparing this, because we need it in six hours.' We did that on a regular basis every morning. After twenty minutes, everybody went his way, and it was like all the generals went to their different areas. It was done like a military operation, and I think that's how you *can* do it."

As Verhoeven is quick to point out, the job couldn't have been done without the work of his "gen-



erals:” “I was fortunate that I had a really good assistant team. My first assistant and second assistant were really into the movie and took a lot of weight from my shoulders. I had an excellent second unit director [Vic Armstrong], so a lot of the stuff could be delegated. I think if you don’t have these people, then it would have been, well, disastrous, really. They supported me, and carried the weight of the entire organizational, logistic stuff. And the same applies to the producers [Jon Davison and Alan Marshall]. It’s not the kind of movie you do on your own. It’s not, *He’s the director and he knows absolutely everything*. That’s not the case, at least in my opinion, when you do a complicated a special effects movie.”

That situation changed in the editing room, where Verhoeven had a rare final cut agreement with Sony. Clocking in two hours and two minutes in the version completed at the time of our interview, the film, according to the director, did not change drastically from the initial cut. “I think the first cut was two hours and fifteen minutes or twelve minutes, so basically we only took a couple of things out. Or not even took things out, just made it sharper, which is what you normally do, isn’t it? You cut an exit or jump a little bit into the scene instead of having them come into the room and then starting the scene. Sometimes you shoot it that way because you think there’s something interesting, but later when you see it you say, ‘Oh no, we can jump ahead.’ We tightened it, but without affecting the scenes in any way. The film is ninety, ninety-five percent like written.”

While the director has been sending kudos to the effects companies, he also acknowledges that none of this would have been possible without the advances made since his last genre foray, *TOTAL RECALL*. “I think the shots look great, in both areas: the starship areas and the insect areas are both well-executed and seem to go well beyond what has been done with Cameron and Lucas. But of course it’s clearly building on top of what other people have achieved in the last five or six years. It’s the same digital techniques; I’m not so much an inventor there, but some of the people I worked with pushed it as far as they could. The legacy of Lucas, Spielberg, and Cameron is there, and you just stand on the shoulders, you hope; you stand on their shoulders to reach the next level.”

**Dan Persons**

## POLITICALLY CORRECT ENEMY

**“I saw in the script the possibility to create an enemy that was politically correct,” said Verhoeven, “that could be killed without having to go into humanistic reasoning.”**



Casper Van Dien as Johnny Rico leads the charge against the alien enemy.

ented civilization, structured along the lines of their destructive abilities: acid spewing tanker bugs; death-ray shooting plasma bugs, etc. As for Heinlein’s controversial stab at social speculation, Neumeier decided to stick with the author’s vision of a workable, fascist society, but twist the view around with *ROBOCOP*-like satire and—at Davison’s insistence (and with some initial reluctance from the screenwriter himself)—occasional breaks for the FedNet: web-page-like interludes that would parody, NewsBreak-style, the frequently-absurd excesses of government propaganda.

**T**he newly sanctified *STARSHIP TROOPERS* script was forwarded to Verhoeven, who was impressed enough with what he saw to commit time towards molding the work to his own vision. Over the next six months, the director worked with Neumeier to pound out another draft of the script. Amongst other changes worked into the new edition: taking the previously male Dizzy Flores and turning the character into a female

classmate of hero Johnny Rico, thus opening the door for a pair of interlocking love triangles between Rico, Flores, crack starship pilot Carmen Ibanez and her fellow pilot and prospective suitor, Zander Barcalow. With sufficient tweaking—the finished product is so gung-ho that John Wayne would be embarrassed—the director was sold enough to commit to the project.

Of his reaction to the initial script, Verhoeven said, “What I liked was the sort-of pseudo-fascistic outlook, what we call this fascist utopia. That was one of the interesting elements, but it was certainly not why I wanted to do the movie; it wouldn’t be enough. More important for me, I thought, was the whole creation of this kind of insect species, this different, layered, biological enemy. I think what I saw in the script was the possibility to create an enemy that was politically correct, that you could kill, in a certain way, [as you could once] do in a movie about the German enemy. It’s the attitude that we—the Europeans, and the Americans at the same time—had about the Second

World War: the enemy was Japanese or German, and they were definitely devilish; they were not seen in any human way. If you listened to documentaries at that time, the enemy is completely dehumanized.

“That’s not possible anymore—you cannot do a movie like that, with Germans and Japanese. Nowadays we are in a situation where you would look at both sides, and you would give them more human behavior. At least I would do that. I would think it would be boring to just look at Germans and Japanese as inhuman, devilish people; I don’t see it that way. But I thought that it would be interesting to [try that attitude] once again with a species that basically can be detested, that can be killed without having to go into humanistic reasoning. It would just be a straight, biological enemy, where you would not identify with the enemy anymore.”

Finding the perfect enemy was one thing. Proving that your giant, arachnid baddies would scan on the wide-screen was another. Based on the re-drafted script and Verhoeven’s commitment to it, TriStar forwarded enough money for a 60-second effects test. In July of 1994, Verhoeven, Tippet, and a corps of hand-selected crew people went out to Vasquez Rocks to shoot the live-action plates. “It was the dead of summer,” Neumeier recalled, “August 19th or 21st, and we went out to Vasquez Rocks. There was a little crew; everybody was just showing up because it seemed like a fun thing to do. We had a little money to do something; we had trucks and a wardrobe guy. The d.p. had worked with Joe Dante, and we had a stunt guy [Olympic athlete Mitch Gaylord] running around with a machine gun. I was a dead extra, and there was another guy who was cut in half, who was not alive, of course, and I lay out in the sun all day, and Paul ran around and mimed being a giant bug.

“At the end of the day, I recall, everybody laughed and said, ‘Well, I guess maybe we’ll be able to use two or three of those shots. Maybe we’ll get something.’ Several months went by, and when I finally saw



it, it was pretty much exactly the way Paul had imagined it. Everything worked very well, and Phil [Tippet] began animating the bugs into it—he had a very small staff at that time going—and they took about three months, and they made this wonderful little test. When we saw it, Jon and I wanted to run down to Westwood and show it before a movie, just to watch what the crowds would do.”

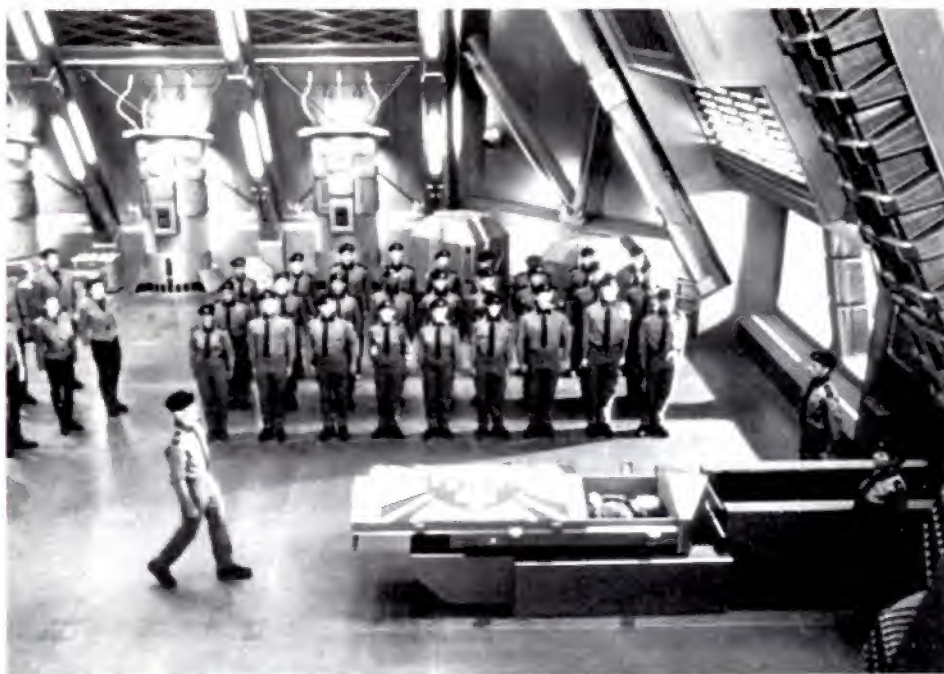
The public never got a chance to see the footage—which in the end ran a total of 47 seconds—but the brass at TriStar did. Neumeier said, “For someone who’s never seen two giant bugs fight a guy with a machine gun, it was just the coolest thing you’d ever seen. I think that TriStar and Sony and all the money people looked at it and scratched their heads and said, ‘Wow, that’s a bug!’ But I still think they didn’t quite know, like, ‘Well, should we really do this ridiculous movie? We had to wait a long time for the money to come around, and I think that the heroes in the money world were essentially Joe Roth at Disney, and whoever his analysts were. Mark Canton came in and put his approval on the whole project. I think this kind of movie, which is very large in ambition—particularly on a finance level—it required two studios to be interested in it.”

“I think that essentially they were interested in Paul Verhoeven’s ability to do the movie that they could see a glimmer of in the script. That was something that someone at both studios decided to roll the dice on, which is a really brave thing, a thing that is rare in this day and age. If you think about the old days, that’s how some really great films were made, and it just doesn’t happen anymore. I glimpsed how it had happened here, albeit on the level of high-finance, and I thought it was admirable.”

STARSHIP TROOPERS was now a go project, a co-production between TriStar, who would handle domestic distribution, and Disney, who would handle the international release. At Verhoeven’s request, producer Alan Marshall—who had previously exercised his abilities on Verhoeven’s BASIC INSTINCT and SHOWGIRLS, as well as MIDNIGHT EXPRESS,

## FUTURE FASCISM

**“There’s a certain irony to it,” Verhoeven said of the film’s future society. “Heinlein is much more straight about it—there’s no criticism or irony in the book.”**



The stark, dark look of this military funeral consciously evokes the imagery of Nazi Germany—the film’s ironic commentary on Heinlein’s view of the future.

and ANGEL HEART—came in to handle the massive demands of the live-action shoot, while Davison would direct his attentions to the extensive special effects sequences. “I obviously know [Verhoeven] better than most people,” Marshall said. “We have our ups and downs, but overall we get on pretty well together. I have an enormous amount of respect for him, and I think he certainly has a certain amount of respect for the job that I do, which is to keep the ship moving along. That’s the most important asset that I bring.”

As with Verhoeven’s previous films, Jost Vacano was recruited as D.P., while Allan Cameron, who had done production design on SHOWGIRLS, as well as WILLOW and HIGHLANDER, would build the diverse locales: the unified, future Earth; the high-tech, pre-fab military installations on Tango Urilla and Planet P; and the subterranean hideouts of the Klendathu enemy. Basil Poledoris (ROBOCOP) would handle the musical score.

Phil Tippet, having originally budgeted for all effects work on the show—including such

new-to-his-company fields as special makeup effects—decided in the end to concentrate his efforts where they best could be showcased: on the creation of the CGI-generated bugs. Sony-owned TriStar made sure that the spaceship effects went to Sony Pictures Imageworks, while VCE’s Peter Kuran picked up such miscellaneous shots as the compositing-in of Rico’s wounds during a flogging sequence, and a tricky, motion-control water-tank shot for when Rico undergoes intensive medical care after a battlefield wounding. Amalgamated Dynamics Incorporated handled the animatronics, providing, at their most flamboyant, a giant, “bucking bronco” tanker bug. The more visceral make-up effects—all those fallen fighting men and women, and their various limbs, torsos, and miscellaneous bits of anatomy—were turned over to Kevin Yagher.

For his human cannon fodder, Verhoeven chose mostly from a corps of big-screen newcomers. Casper Van Dien, whose only previous feature credit was the title role in JAMES DEAN: RACE WITH DESTINY, was chosen for the

hell-bent-for-glory role of Johnny Rico. Denise Richards, most recently from Greg Araki’s NOWHERE, was cast as impetuous starship pilot Carmen Ibanez; while Patrick Muldoon, as pilot Zander Barcalow, would compete for the attentions of the toothsome Carmen; and DOOGIE HOWSER’s own Neil Patrick Harris, as psychic Poindexter Carl Jenkins. Genre experience would be provided by Michael Ironside—of SCANNERS and TOTAL RECALL—as blood-n-guts history teacher Jean Raszak; Dina Meyer (JOHNNY MNEMONIC and DRAGONHEART) would become boot-camp grunt and rival for Johnny’s affections Dizzy Flores; Jake Busey (TWISTER, THE FRIGHTENERS) was cast as Johnny’s fighting mate, Ace Levy.

Of his largely untested cast, Verhoeven said, “In one way it’s easier, because they will not immediately challenge your view. It’s a bit more difficult, though, because they have less experience, and you have to experiment more; you have to back them up a little bit more. So it has its advantages and disadvantages, but it worked very well, in my opinion. I think everybody had a good time, and I think they were all challenged by being physical and being a character at the same time. I think it was very refreshing to work that way.”

“Basically, there was an absence of ego with the individual actors and actresses. Everybody had a feeling that they were part of a bigger thing, and they were not trying to stand out or to say, ‘This is about me.’ It was pleasant; it’s a bit more time-consuming, because there are things you know a bit better about what the camera does after you have done ten movies than if you have done no movies at all. So you have to teach that—or at least point it out—and sometimes you have to re-do it because they do not realize where the camera is, or whatever. But that was still a limited problem, I would say.”

The sweep of Neumeier’s narrative—which in the course of two-hours of high-charged entertain-

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# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## ILM

### *Helping complete the effects on deadline.*

*By Dan Persons*

When STARSHIP TROOPERS found itself running up against deadlines while trying to complete its special effects, Industrial Light and Magic was called in to help shoulder the burden. "There was a certain point in the production," said George Murphy, who oversaw ILM's contribution to the project, "when a proposal was made to see if we would take on some shots that would help distribute the load. We took into consideration 43 shots. In particular, they had come up with some sequences that would be somewhat self-contained and isolated, so while we had to have continuity with the other work, it wouldn't necessarily cut directly with some of the other effects shots."

What was handed to ILM included Carmen Ibanez's hot-

doggin' debut as pilot of the space battleship Rodger Young, shots of a moon-girdling space station, and images of a war-scarred fleet limping home from battle. Said Murphy, "The biggest concern was whether we could get the physical model-work done in the time-frame. Our model guys really crushed through that. That's probably the part of the crew that really had to work around the clock so we could get stuff into the pipeline. [Some of the models, including the fleet battle station Ticonderoga, were supplied by Sony Pictures Imageworks' own Thunderstone shop.] The amount of detailing that had to be done to these models to hold scale for some of the camera moves and just to show some of the damage—that was one of the biggest concerns. We had enough time if we didn't get hung-up anywhere. Fortunately,

Most of the ILM effects were for self-contained sequences, such as a trip to a moon base, which did not intercut with work completed by other effects groups.



Called upon to complete effects that had already been started, ILM composited many elements shot by Sony Effects, using the green screen method (top).

a few things took less time than we thought, and that helped us catch up on some other things."

The effects are reminiscent of a World War II naval film, according to Murphy. "Much like STAR WARS took its cue from planes flying in the air just to get that sense of motion and speed, Paul tended towards thinking of these things literally as ships in water. They'll list and sink in some of the other scenes; even though in space there is no up and down, we portray the sense of that, just because it gives the audience something to understand what's going on. From an emotional level, it tends to work very well."

"These ships are supposed to be half-mile long cruisers. They're like naval carriers: they're loaded with troops and other vessels, and they approach the battle zone and drop their ships. They don't move quickly; they're good targets.... It's a matter of finding the right balance with the camera moves. There are fairly involved things going on here, and sometimes the more you move the camera, the smaller the scale feels."

Complicating the matter was the need to use live-action

plates that were filmed by Sony Pictures Imageworks. "A lot of the elements that for our foreground cockpit elements and some of the scenes looking out the windows, were elements that were shot at Sony on green-screen," said Murphy. "They had been shot actually before we got involved with the project. Part of the challenge of coming into the show was that working with elements that were designed by somebody who was expecting to put them together in a whole different environment. Everybody has their things set up to work in a little different way, so making things work for ourselves required a little adjustment."

"Traditionally, when we're shooting things for ourselves, we shoot blue, because there have been some problems in the past with the way film records the green-screen: you can get a built-in matte-line. So it actually it gave us a chance to refine some of our green extraction techniques. A lot of other facilities use green as a standard, and we've sort-of shied away from it. But it gave us a chance to nail down some of that."

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# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## SONY IMAGEWORKS

*Taking the Troopers to outer space.*

*By Dan Persons*

Although Phil Tippett's CGI unit would be carrying the lion's share of the STARSHIP TROOPERS effects, the guys at Sony Pictures Imageworks had no illusions about the level of work being demanded of them. "We only had about 125 shots," said visual effects supervisor Dan Radford, who was brought in by Imageworks president Ken Ralston specifically for TROOPERS. "Phil Tippett had 200-plus insect shots right out of the gate. So it sounded like we had a rather small role to play. But Paul [Verhoeven] was rather economical in his design of the film: you don't have an outside effects shot of a spaceship unless everything in the

One of the two model-movers custom-designed by Barry Walton, allowing three axes of motion.



shot is working, hard. If you take your basic breakdown of a show that has a hundred shots, maybe twenty are big-money shots, and another forty are middling service shots; then maybe the next forty or thirty you do between coffee breaks—easy, mechanical shots. [In TROOPERS,] almost all of our hundred were like your worst twenty. We really didn't have a single, easy shot."

Members of Imageworks had to accustom themselves to Paul Verhoeven's approach to filmed fantasy. "What Scott and I used as the guide which never, never got us wrong," said Radford, "was that Paul never wants to do things the easy way. That is, if you look at a film about ships smacking into each other and blowing things up in space, there's a recipe card for every single thing that happens in this film, in terms of at least a visual touchstone or something we've seen before. There'd be something in your mind to reach up onto the mental shelf and pull off pretty much a pre-defined set of techniques for doing it. But that's not what Paul wanted. Paul very much insisted that we try things that had been deliberately avoided in the past—because they're just difficult to do—and [that we] try and show things in a slightly different way.

"We had very strong feelings about the space material. We wanted to portray it in a more realistic style than has typically been done. If you look at the design of Paul's films and his visions of the future, they're always a bit sterile, and that goes

in synch often with his themes of the future. He's always warning us about the perils of an overly-organized society—that things tend to get a bit regimented and a bit cold because of that. If you look at the design of our show, you see a lot of very large, extruded and formed surfaces in these large, manufactured objects which we call spaceships. The design we're trying to get to is that this is actually a rather cold and dangerous place; it's not like sitting in your living room and driving around space in comfort. These are military vehicles you're in, in a state of peril. And like most military vehicles in real life, they can be just as dangerous to you as they are to your opponent if something goes wrong, or if you're foolish. Our lighting, our treatment of surfaces, very much tries to portray... not a starkness, because we really did want to preserve the sort of chilling beauty that you'd see in



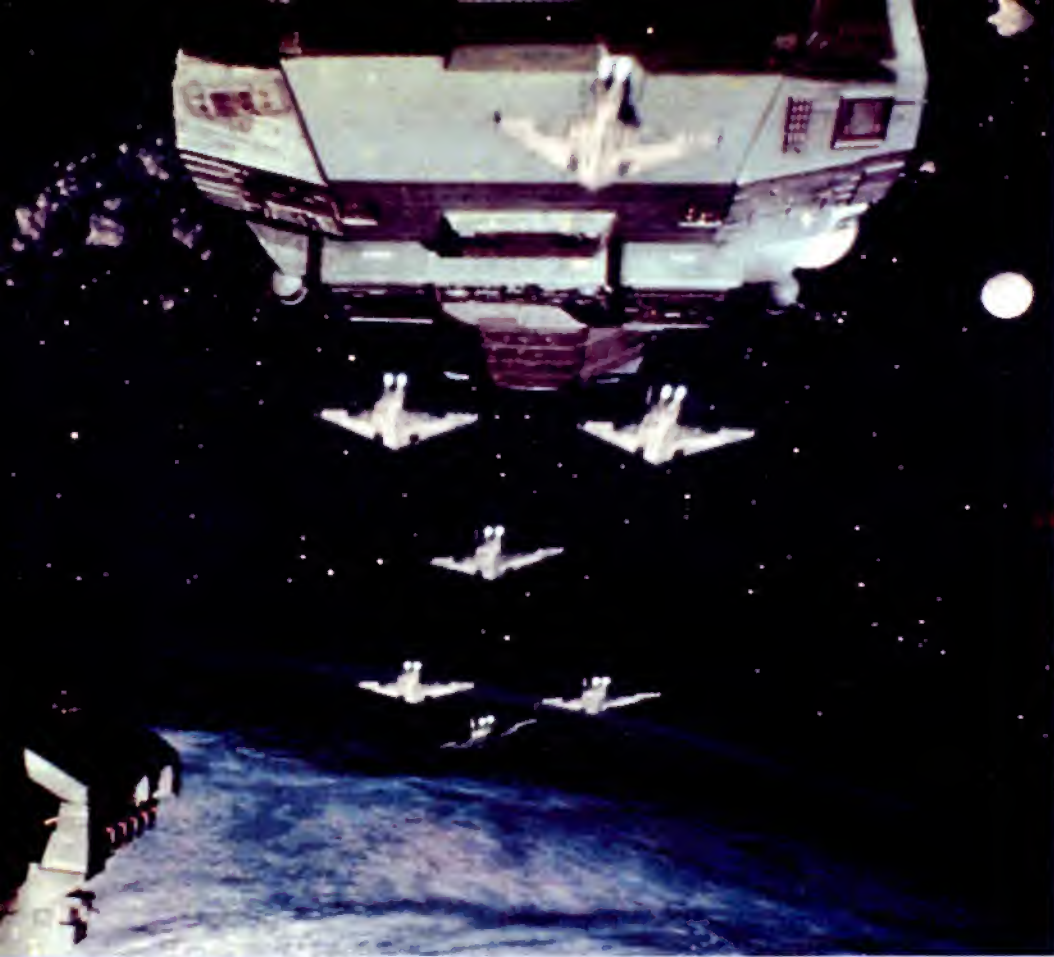
films like 2001 and 2010. You wanted to keep that feeling of awe and scope, but you also wanted to portray it as a hostile environment, a place where we wouldn't naturally be. So we go with a lot of high-key lighting situations; we try not to be timid in portraying difficult lighting situations with the models, even when there's destruction going on. And we try not to be timid in showing what happens when these things interact; large, massive things trying to avoid each other, or work in concert with each other in large formations. That's basically the look we've been trying to portray—just the size and power of being there."

To pull off the level of verisimilitude that Verhoeven demanded, the crew at Imageworks decided to take an unusu-

A Starship Troopers outpost, on an alien landscape, resembles a fort.







Sony Imageworks provided shots of Earth's space battalions carrying troops to battle. As STAR WARS used WW-II movie dog fights for inspiration, STARSHIP TROOPERS consciously evokes the look of a slow-moving naval armada.

al tack in an industry that in recent years has come to believe that any magic a film demands can be pulled from the belly of a computer: build the mighty, Federation fleet as a set of physical models, and mate the motion-control footage with CG elements of planets and stars. "To me," said Radford, "this is one of the most interesting aspects of the show: with our shop, everything begins in almost every case with something that we photograph; then its entire environment and a lot of the other action pieces that it's relating to like plasma or planets or asteroids—those things are synthetic, added afterwards. Every shot for us is a hybrid shot: between photography, 2D compositing, and 3D animation.

"Everyone involved in the project is a big believer in the quality and skill of traditional model makers, and the ability of such tools to bring a richer, deeper, in many ways grittier vision to the screen, getting away from some of those clean, cut-out type looks that certain levels of computer graphic ships would bring to the screen. I'm a big fan of digital, having come up through those ranks; but at the same time, a physical model still has the ability to be detailed out, to be worked on, to be analyzed, and to be photographed in very efficient manners. I think in the long run it winds up being, still, for upper-end model work, more cost-effective to do it physically than digitally."

To get the job done, Sony went the extra mile of setting up a division within their effects division, Thunderstone, to create the elaborate models. "This is one of the largest model shows ever done," explained George Merkert, the visual effects producer whose main bailiwick was physical effects. "We built a great number of models, on the order of twenty or twenty-five of 'em, at various scales for spaceships of the Rodger Young class, along with tactical fighters and drop-ships.

"We've changed some of the details [from the book]. What happens now is that the starships are a cross between a battleship and a troop transport—they take the starship troopers from Earth to the arachnid system. A large part of our work is photographing the Rodger Young class ships and the dropships that, when they eject, are

An outer space collision during the confusion of battle—one of numerous "mayhem events" filmed by Sony Imageworks to lend an epic scale to the film.



full of troopers who then land on the planet and battle the bugs. A lot of the space-work is ours. We've got models ranging from a few inches long to more than 18 feet long, which are models of the Rodger Young class ships.

"I also worked on TOTAL RECALL, and see a lot of similarities between RECALL and this picture. [Verhoeven] likes the kind of design where every piece of what you see visually has an apparent function. He doesn't like decoration for decoration's sake. As a result, you get these very utilitarian but beautiful spaceships. They have a kind of realness about them that you can believe, because it seems as if there isn't anything on them that's so fantastical that it couldn't actually exist. Which is a very different kind of feeling than you get from, say, the Millennium Falcon, or any of the spaceships you see on the STAR TREK series, which are more fantastical than what

you'd see in this show."

Close to 200 effects people labored for a year and a half in various aspects of the project, creating and manipulating almost 2000 individual film elements that incorporated the actual ships and their individual lighting passes. Pete Kosachek, who photographed Image-works' contributions to JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH, performed the same role for most of TROOPERS model-work; Alex Funke was brought in to oversee photography on the numerous pyro elements.

Working under a tight deadline, camera-department head Barry Walton developed two custom-designed model-movers specifically for the show. One, called the tri-ax, allowed the model to move along three axes ("You'd have to picture it as a sort-of rounded dish that the model moves in," explained senior visual effects supervisor Scott E. Anderson). The other, built specifically to handle the massive, eighteen foot model of the combo troop-battleship Rodger Young, was promptly dubbed "Gigantor." "A bitchin' model mover," was Merkert's sage estimation of this mechanism, its stepper-motors so powerful that, according to Radford, "you could mount a Lexus on it and fly it around in space if you wanted to."

Further complicating Image-works' task was Verhoeven's insistence that certain, key sequences be shot in adherence with the basic tenets of film

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# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## PHIL TIPPETT

*Bringing the bugs to life.*

*By Lawrence French*

Shortly after finishing his work on JURASSIC PARK, effects maestro Phil Tippett reunited with ROBOCOP director Paul Verhoeven, to film the arachnid warriors that threaten to conquer the Earth in STARSHIP TROOPERS. The twist for Tippett Studios (located in Berkeley, California) was that they would completely eschew their traditional stop-motion techniques in favor of the more *au courant* computer animation that had come of age in Spielberg's dino opus. "It was always a given that the effects would be done digitally," says Tippett. "We had already done a number of in-house tests, as well as some smaller pictures, so we understood the basics behind putting together a CGI Studio. With the kind of freedom you get with these new CGI tools, we could structure the effects sequences to get the utmost out of each shot."

To mastermind the design of the bugs, Tippett selected his longtime colleague, Craig Davies, who was responsible for the malfunctioning ED-209 robot in ROBOCOP. "Craig would bring his drawings down and we'd all look at them for different things," said Tippett. "I'd be looking for animation possibilities, while Paul was looking for something that peaked his aesthetic."

Since Davies already har-

bored a longstanding interest in entomology, he was an ideal choice to create the fearsome arachnid warriors. "Most kids like playing with bugs," says Davies, "and their mechanical design has always been one of my interests. But when we studied insects for the movie, it was more from a giant bug perspective, then from a scientific approach. Working in CGI, we were also motivated to keep things segmented, and we paid a lot of care to where the surfaces joined. The joints themselves needed a lot of attention, like they had a membrane, so they would seem completely believable."

After Davies came up with a rough working model of the warrior bug, he took the initial test footage and scanned it into the computer. Then animators Blair Clark and Adam Valdez went to work and inserted two warrior bugs into the shot. "It looked pretty good," relates Davies, "and we refined the design from there. The design was initially worked out by our talking with Paul Verhoeven, Ed Neumeier, and Jon Davidson. Ed had this bug hierarchy in mind, with a sort of caste system for the various bugs. We sketched ideas out on all the different bugs, and then tried to establish an overall style. We culled out the designs that were deemed most appropriate. We then went through a very intensive 2-D design phase, and



Top to bottom: (1 & 2) The arachnids attack in formation, overwhelming the Troopers, the agility frighteningly realized in CGI. (3) Front and side views of bug designs, by Craig Davies, of Tippett Studios. (4) Phil Tippett holds a bug maquette; no actual miniature models were used in the filming.





Employing skills developed in stop-motion, a "motion animator" controls the movements of a warrior bug making an adjustment on the real-time Digital Input Device, the 1996 Technical Oscar-winning invention of the Tippett Studio.

once we had picked out the main bugs, we went to a maquette phase. Since the warrior bug was the most common bug, we decided to nail that one down first. It has four legs, with pointed toes, chewing mandibles and huge jaws that can cut people in half. The warrior bug really set the standard for all the other bugs."

Along with the design of the different bugs, a complete genealogy schematic was worked out, giving them names and specific functions, although much of that information will not be conveyed in the finished movie, because the Federal scientists know little about the alien species themselves. Laughed Tippett, "They're the bug people from the outer reaches of the solar system, and that's pretty much all there is [in the movie] to explain them. There's a scene in a high school biology class where they're cutting apart some Arkellian Sand Beetles and there's an image of the warrior bug that comes out of that—how they evolved through millions of years of evolution, until they eventually colonized planets, but that's about it."

Originally, ten different bug species were planned for the movie, but due to dramatic and budgetary concerns, the final number was reduced to six. Of the six that made the final film, there was an attempt to make them function somewhat analogous to the enemy forces in a World War II action film. "Although it's a science-fiction-fantasy picture, it's also very

much a war picture," stated Davies. "So the tanker bug is like a huge tank, or half-track, with a flame-thrower. The hopper bug is one of the specialty bugs. It has wings and can fly, so it fills an Air Force type of role. The warrior bugs are like the infantry or ground troops. They have huge jaws and are very aggressive and agile. The plasma bug is like the heavy duty artillery. It can launch plasma into outer space and hit spaceships, or even asteroids, causing them to fall towards Earth."

At the top of the bug hierarchy is the strangest and most unusual of all the insects: the brain bug. It functions as commander of the bug armies, and has a whip like palpus that can pierce the skull, enabling it to suck out and absorb all the knowledge inside a human brain. Because the brain bug plays such a central role at the climax of the film, Davies devoted a substantial amount of time to its design. "We did about 20 drawings before we built the first maquette," said Davies. "Then we did a detailed model and talked to Paul about it. We'd get down low and look at the model, putting little characters near him to try to figure out how he'd behave. Then when the final design was approved, we digitized it into the computer. What we ended up with is about ten feet high, has sharp facial claws, a big giant mouth and eight eyes. He's got ten small legs, so he can't really move around on his

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## BANKROLLING THE BUG HUNT

**"I think the studios were interested in Paul Verhoeven's ability to do the movie that they could see a glimmer of in the script," said Neumeier, "which is a brave thing"**

ment incorporated several, large-scale invasions on several, large-scale planets—clearly called for vistas that couldn't be contained on any sound stage. Location scouting for the film consumed six months of pre-production. "We had a big scouting department at the beginning," said cinematographer Jost Vacano, "They came up with lots photographs from of books, *National Geographic*, and different sources. We started looking at pictures. Then some people went to look at the locations, and we would find out that, yes, it's a wonderful shot, but it's the only shot you can do, because all around it's villages or streets or power lines or whatever. After that stage, Verhoeven and I went to the real possibilities, and finally we made a [decision] on where to shoot."

Two sites were chosen to represent the major, off-world settings: Hell's Half-Acre in Casper, Wyoming, would serve as both Planet P and bug home-world Klendathu, while a private ranch out in the Badlands of South Dakota would provide the settings for Tango Urilla. Closer to home, Mile Square Park in Fountain Valley became the setting for the boot camp sequences that occupy much of the film's first half, while L.A.'s Kaiser Permanente Medical Center became New Uni High School ("Very beautiful architecture," said production designer Alan Cameron. "Very hard-edged building, and absolutely perfect for the kind of look we were trying to create.").

**P** rincipal photography for STARSHIP TROOPERS actually began with the end. In the last week of April 1996, Paul Verhoeven began the task of bringing the war between Earth and Klendathu to vivid, percussive life by stag-

ing the climactic battle on Planet P out at Hell's Half-Acre in Wyoming. Said the director, "Basically, with the big things we did in Wyoming—which had about five-hundred soldiers in frame—I was staging a landing operation, like the Allies landing in Normandy, but with spaceships. I mean, it's still basically a small operation—Normandy had more people than this. It's not thousands and thousands of people, but it looks big."

Initial site of the massive, troop action: the fort, a 150 foot by 150 foot, pre-fab military post that suddenly turns into a death-trap as the enemy springs a surprise attack against the unsuspecting Mobile Infantry. And while in the future such installations may be deployed with a simple push of the button, here on Earth in the late 20th century, and in the wastes of Hell's Half Acre, the task wasn't quite so easy. "It was very difficult getting the materials down there," said Allan Cameron, "and then the weather was extraordinarily cold and then warm and then pouring with rain, and my construction crew worked miracles to put this thing up in time for us to shoot. I think we had about eight or nine weeks in all, which was to get the materials down there and build it and get it painted and dressed in that time. They did a great job."

"Basically, it was a platform, because the terrain is quite rough, and I imagined they'd put a platform down. There was some sort of aluminum plating on top of that, and there were walls around it with a hydraulic drawbridge. It was very much like a legion's fort: within it there were the actual huts, the barracks, storerooms, the mess hall, a small communications area, a landing area for craft to come in, and a parapet around,



# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## MICHAEL IRONSIDE

*The genre veteran eagerly signed on for another tour of duty with Verhoeven.*

*By Dan Persons*

It may have been a mistake, but at the time it seemed logical to start an interview with Michael Ironside by asking about the more controversial aspects of Robert Heinlein's novel—after all, shouldn't the man playing "History and Moral Philosophy" teacher Jean Raszak have a few things to say about the desirability and perils of a fascist future? Unfortun-



**Ironside (previous in Verhoeven's TOTAL RECALL) plays "Moral Philosophy" teacher Jean Raszak.**

ately, a question about how Mr. Ironside bought into Verhoeven's interpretation of Heinlein's future, brought the response: "I think these are inappropriate questions to ask me, to tell you the truth. Especially with this certain amount of sensationalism in saying 'buying into it'—it speaks of irresponsibility. You seem to be defensive about the material—looking to find fault, rather than having an honest curiosity here. Skepticism of some sort."

After a few minutes of reassuring Ironside that we weren't prejudging the film, the actor was able to relax, cluing us in to his impression of how he and the cast fit into the Heinlein-Verhoeven universe: "What I think is applaudable is that there are no stars in this film. This is no star vehicle; there's no huge name. The story deals with the human condition, and the way the human condition is bound to take a right turn or a left turn and get

a little bit lost. This is my take on the book, leaving Heinlein's politics out of it. Even if he wasn't intending to do that, I think he sort of documented how we can make a mistake, how humanity can make a mistake.

"In this film, there is a broad spectrum of personalities; there's no one character that is the leading man. It would be much easier for the audience if they could look at this and make a judgment on right-wing politics, whether it's something they want or not. But I don't basically see it as a political film. Politics in film are always a subplot; this is basically an action film with political undertones. It's a war film. I don't think we've had a war film in a while."

We may not have had a war film for a while, but neither have we had a character quite like Jean Raszak. A composite of the novel's didactic Mr. Dubois and the namesake, blood-and-guts Lieutenant who

serves as Heinlein's military ideal, the character was no less a paragon of duty and self-sacrifice in the screenplay. With Ironside, however, the die-hard Raszak underwent a significant deepening of motivations. "The interesting thing about the character," said the actor, "is that he is a godless character. I would say probably beyond agnostic at the beginning of the story, and quite comfortable in the predestination

of man by man's power. Then all that's left [after the destruction of his home by the Klendathu] is the void. I think that by the time we catch up to him again, his wife and children have been killed, and he basically is left with a living void. It all changes, and it was interesting to play that change—to go from the foolhardiness of his beliefs in the beginning, and the hard reality of living in a place where everything you've ever loved is taken away from you. It'll be interesting to see if that little arc transposes.

"As the character became more a part of the machinery of that society, I wanted him to become more human in the sense that it's the things you lose that makes you human. That's the part I wanted to see: the over-compensation for what the guy's lost. When you lose something, people have the tendency—I have the tendency

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like battlements around it."

The physical challenges didn't stop when the construction crew cleared away. Mustering an army that included the lead actors and, as extras, local townspeople and students from nearby drama schools, Verhoeven mounted both nighttime action for the disastrous invasion of Klendathu, and daytime shoots for the troop movements on Planet P. As Verhoeven remembered: "I think everybody thinks, 'Wow, that was difficult, but I did it.' That's my feeling. That's what I have to say: 'Well, it really was rough,' and it was exhausting and warm and cold and raining and always in the open and every night you were exhausted because it was mountain up, mountain down; there's nothing horizontal. For months you were never standing horizontally; you were always standing on an incline, in one way or another. So you're really physically quite challenged. But I think people liked it in retrospect... It was tough, especially for all these people when it was very hot, with these big uniforms that they had, all made of rubber and having a lot of weight on their shoulders from all the gear. People sometimes lost consciousness, but that was rare, in fact. Everybody survived. We had no accidents, no problems, and I think in retrospect everybody admires himself for having gone through it with good results. In retrospect, I doubt that anybody would be negative about the experience."

All may have survived, but not necessarily thanks to the costuming. While Verhoeven and company had decided early on to dispense with the heavily-armed powersuits that were a major set-piece of the Heinlein novel—not enough leeway for differentiation of the principals, they decided, and way too cumbersome for scenes featuring hundreds of extras ("With powersuits," Marshall noted, "we'd have started them at the bottom of a slope, and I'm sure that ninety percent of them would never have gotten to the top")—the Mobile Infantry uniforms developed by costume designer Ellen Mirojnick did the actors no favors in the punishing environments chosen



## SHADOW BOXING

**“Actors were acting to the preparation plate, where Phil Tippett's team would have poles,” said Marshall. “Paul and Phil would explain the pole represented where the bug was.”**

for the film.

Casper Van Dien, who by virtue of his lead role got to see the worst of it in the elaborate, “hero” uniform, said: “Comfort was not the main issue. The uniform looks like a bad-ass uniform, and it looks so cool. It had its problems. We had things that were made for the heat—actually nothing was really, totally made for the heat, but we had short-sleeves in one [version], which really didn’t do much because most of the equipment was so hot. They had these rubber necks on them that were diving things; [the uniform rested] on our shoulders, [and] on our necks were parts of a diving uniform which did nothing but make you sweat like you’re dying. That was hot and that was hard and that was tough, but most people didn’t have to be there every day. The extras did, and I did—fourteen hour days, six days a week. All together, all the equipment that we would carry, including the weapon—which was a Morita rifle and a shot-gun attached—weighed 52 pounds. That’s the hero outfit and the hero weapon. And then there was this three-quarter of an inch rubber uniform which looked like, like...something out of the movies,” he laughed.

The ordeal was made even tougher by the elements. “The weather constantly changed,” said Van Dien. “It would change five times during the day. We’d be coming out in cold night, and it would start to get warm during the day, and then all of a sudden it would freeze, and then we’d be cold again. I thought it was the coolest thing in the world; some people thought it was Hell.”

In the final estimation, nature scored nominal points against the filmic Troopers: Van Dien fell ill near the end of the shoot in Wyoming, necessitat-

ing time-off and a return trip to the site later on to pick up missed shots. Prior to that, a flash flood rendered a number of the Klendathu sets un-filmable, forcing Verhoeven to cover lost time by shooting interiors while the scenery was rebuilt. “We were due to do fourteen nights for the Klendathu landing,” Marshall recalled. “We started on one night; it was a beautiful, balmy evening, amazing weather. The second night it started off in the same sort of circumstances as beautiful, balmy weather, and we had a downpour—I mean a *huge* storm—that flooded everything outside. We couldn’t use it for a week and a half.”

**S**TARSHIP TROOPERS remained in Wyoming for eight weeks, followed by two and a half weeks in South Dakota. By July of 1996, after location shooting in L.A. covered the high school and boot camp sequences, the production decamped to Sony’s Culver City studios for twelve weeks of interiors. Major challenges for the TROOPERS crew once they got themselves onto a nice, comfy sound stage included sequences on the bridge of the massive battleship Rodger

On the eve before his first battle, Johnny Rico (Van Dien) commemorates the occasion with computerized laser tattoo on his arm: “Death From Above.”



Verhoeven directs an arachnid autopsy—Earth must learn to know its enemy.

Young—a green-screen set mounted on a gimbaled platform with more interactive lighting than all the road-tours of *Cats* put together—and the climactic battle in Allan Cameron’s giant, vaulted alien hive. “I had to design the cavern so it had lots of hidden entrances and exits,” said the production designer, “so that the flow of the action would work very well. I had to design it so there was a big enough entrance for the brain bug to come in and retreat through when the action got very heated. I was really making it almost like a giant piece of sculpture that worked for the action. That’s what I like to do with design: actually think of it in a very sculptural manner.

“The caverns filled all of stage 29 on the Sony lot, and I think that’s about 120 or 150 feet, and 45 feet high. It’s a pretty big space, but when I was designing it, I wanted to take into consideration how these bugs moved and went through

the space. Obviously, they don’t exist in reality, they’re all computer generated, but I had to design the set as though they were really there. When they come through a tunnel or stand on rocky shelves, everything had to be designed to [accommodate] their size and the way Phil Tippett had made them move from rock to rock and across terrain. It was quite an interesting challenge, designing a cavern for bugs that didn’t exist.”

How exactly does one design for so chimerical an entity as a computer-generated arachnid? Not easily, according to Cameron: “I did a picture called *JUNGLE BOOK*, where there were real animals and you knew their size; you knew how they moved through space, and you could actually go and see what they need. But when it’s completely created in a computer, it becomes very difficult to build a real space for it. The other thing I had to take into consideration was, because they’re computer-generated and because it’s extremely difficult to make a computer-generated image actually touch a real floor, the floor had to be carefully designed in conjunction with Phil Tippett.”

Not surprisingly, Tippett and company were regular fixtures on the TROOPERS sets, making sure that their CGI bugs were getting the kind of respect naturally accorded fourteen foot, bad-ass arachnids from another world. Said Marshall, “Our actors were acting to the preparation of each plate, which was where Phil Tippett and his team would have poles, and Paul and Phil between them



would explain to our [actors] that this eight foot pole represented the height of the bug at that particular moment; he then would reach up and become twelve foot at this moment, and you'd be firing your Morita at him and you had to make it look reasonably real."

If the actors had any troubles transitioning from abstract description to believable action, Verhoeven was always there to pitch in with a little motivational support. "They showed us videos of some bug tests; they described it to us in great detail," said Van Dien. "They gave us so much information that there was enough stuff to play off of. And if [Verhoeven] ever felt that we weren't getting it, he would jump in there and do his Paul Verhoeven bit, throwing his arms up above his head, doing his scream, 'The bugs!! The bugs!!' Going crazy at the top of his lungs. I never once felt like I had a problem imagining what was happening."

**S**TARSHIP TROOPERS wrapped in October of 1996, after 23 weeks of shooting. With a project that spent a healthy amount of time on over a dozen locations, sucking-in a roster of extras incorporating everyone from curious townies to ambitious drama students, there was no shortage of people willing to mouth-off about the experience. On the *Coming Attractions* movie rumor website, page after page was logged with the participants kudos and gripes, building a consensus that—while it had to be regarded with caution due to the anonymous nature of most of the posts—at least gave an inkling of how cast and crew comported themselves before their public. On the professional side, Casper Van Dien had his own take: "Every detail was covered, every single bit. If there was ever a problem, we had something to take care of it. If it was raining a little bit, and we had rain on the deck and we weren't supposed to have rain on the deck, they brought out these huge blow-torch heaters, like five of 'em, and they dried off the deck in two minutes and it wasn't wet anymore. Snow, they just shoveled it off, put those heaters on again, and we were

#### DELAYED RELEASE

**"Is it a pity that a summer movie is now a fall movie? Yeah," said Verhoeven of the changed schedule. "Am I happy I got the extra time? Yes, we could do a better job this way."**



Fresh from the academy, Denise Richards and Dina Meyer head for the moon.

cool again. It took only like a half an hour to do it; it was amazing. Usually, something like that could ruin the whole day. But they were covered."

Of the notoriously intense Verhoeven under these arduous conditions, the director's closest associates tended to be judicious in their characterizations. The stock description of Verhoeven was: "He's very demanding." VCE's Peter Kuran was able to cast that more in perspective: "He usually knows what he wants, but sometimes the way he articulates it is different from the way I'm interpreting it. The trick is to figure out exactly what he's saying, because when he doesn't get what he wants, he definitely lets you know. With computer [compositing], he'd sit in the screening room and run things back and forth to make sure that the live-action part of the scene matched the original—he doesn't want anything looking 'dupey.' It's like he picks up when we're doing opticals and says, 'I don't want this done as an optical,' or 'I want this done as a computer shot.' So that's why we're winding up doing most of the [composites] as computer shots."

Said Suzanne Pastor, Visual Effects Producer in charge of digital post for Sony Pictures Imageworks, "Interestingly enough, I found Paul very pleasant, very easy to work with. He's decisive. He has a very definite vision for what this movie is going to look like, and he's very open to suggestion. That doesn't mean he's going to accept them all. He listens to what you have to say, and he might go, 'No, no, no—that's all wrong.' But he might listen and say, 'Ah, I see what you mean,' and then he'll ask a question about it. He's very flexible in terms of that. I found him to be a real, professional director. I've worked with some directors who say things like, 'Show me something and I'll know when I see it,' which is impossible with effects. Verhoeven knows that because he's had so much effects experience."

Added Dan Radford, visual effects supervisor at SPI, "The thing that I find actually very enjoyable about working with Paul—although I'd heard stories told about him being very difficult—is that once you can figure out what he wants, and you can give that to him, he is your best ally. Not that it ever

gets easy, because he never wants to feel it's getting to easy for you. Professionally, I find it very enjoyable. That's the point: he does definitely want you to stretch; he does want you to do things you've never done. And if he does establish a trust bond with you, he will help you in getting your work done.

"Paul always knew, somehow, exactly what he wanted to see at the end of this whole process, down to the finest detail. There were certainly times—in the middle of Wyoming with dust blowing things over and pandemonium breaking out and twenty-four-hour-a-day shoots going with different crews and with large stage construction going on simultaneously—when the production designer and I or the d.p. would scratch our heads after talking with Paul, and go, 'Boy, is that what we really ought to be doing?' And I think the vindication came when we saw the first major trailer, put together by the studio. [Senior visual effects supervisor] Scott Anderson and I looked at each other in the theater; we just cracked up. Because once all the pieces were put together, from all the different people involved, it was completely whole; everything belonged. Somehow, out of all the craziness, Paul knew that from the very beginning. In a way, it was kind of thrilling to realize that we could have put that kind of faith in him from the very beginning, and it was justified."

What was the general consensus on taking that leap-of-faith with Paul Verhoeven? Coproducer Neumeier thought he knew: "It was not an easy shoot; at times, on location, it was grueling on everybody. But what I find most interesting is that we broke for a while and then had a little post-production shoot to do some process stuff. And a good number of our crew came back of their own volition. I was surprised by that, because I thought, 'Oh my God, this was so hard; they're never going to want to see us again.' I was saying, 'How did you really feel about working on the movie?' And they'd say, 'STARSHIP TROOPERS was the hardest thing I ever did, but

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# STARSHIP TROOPERS

## MAKEUP F/X

*Creating victims nipped by the bugs.*

**K**evin Yagher's got the bodies, and he doesn't care who knows. The bodies—dummies, actually; fifty of 'em, mangled in various, creative ways and representing both sexes and every race imaginable—were built to limn the roles of those who didn't make it out of STARSHIP TROOPERS alive. Said Yagher, "We had ten that were really primo close-ups, and then other background ones. We ended up just doing most of them the same quality, because of the techniques we were using: we were cranking them out and figured we might as well do the backgrounds as nice as the close-ups. They're all made out of silicon and have armatures in them—some were stiffer and could be positioned and other ones were floppy, so you could pick them up and carry them and they had the proper weight and looked like they were really human beings. And also we did the heads and arms and legs and half-torsos that just were scattered around."

While Phil Tippett handled the CGI bugs, and ADI (Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff) built a full-scale elements for interaction with a couple warrior bugs and the brain bug, Yagher handled their victims. "I came in as sort-of a third party, and I did all the human victims or anything having to do with any kind of special make-up effects, basically."

To hear Yagher describe it, his part of the process wasn't overly arduous. "It wasn't a horrible schedule, but the money was tight. Phil Tippett had wanted to do everything, decided to do just the digital stuff, but he had pre-bid on the bulk of the show. When

you do lots, all the individual things cost less; in other words, if you're doing ten as opposed to one, the ten are going to be individually cheaper. I ended up getting the budget that he had first bid on for the makeup effects, probably figuring that if he had to take money from the digital effects to do the makeup effects or vice versa—do some stuff digitally—he would do that. So I got stuck with that budget. I had to think on my feet as far as the shot goes, to save money."

Yagher teamed up with Phil Tippett on numerous shots, building prosthetics for soldiers whose limbs were melted off by caustic bug-spit. "We designed these remnants, and Phil Tippett did a morph/dissolve in melting the characters down to match to our design. We built these things on-set, sort of a last-minute thing. There's a lot of that kind of stuff: the melting stuff is handled CGI, so it would match into what Phil was doing. We'd provided the artwork of where it was going, and Phil would take the actor. If the actor is running at the camera and

One of Yagher's effects crew rigs a dummy decapitation victim—typical of Verhoeven's brutal take on the realities of combat. "He likes a lot of powerful images," said Yagher."



A Trooper loses an arm in battle, makeup effects by Kevin Yagher. "We couldn't put enough blood on things," said Yagher of working with director Verhoeven.

gets hit with spooze, the next scene would show [a CGI sequence of] it dissolving, and then at the end you'd see the puppet or whatever. We did this one—Bernie is her name—where she gets hit with this stuff and we did a cable-controlled shoulder-arm stump that's left with hanging goo and flesh."

Yagher also worked with VCE's Peter Kuran on several shots, building a prosthetic leg for a complex, motion-controlled water-tank shot, and numerous prosthetics for Michael Ironside's toughened war vet, Jean Rasczak. Said Yagher, "He had a war wound from an earlier battle with a bug that left him armless from his forearm. We created two realistic-looking, life-like, silicon-skinned stub arms. One was cable-

controlled; we hid his own arm behind the back, in wardrobe, so at certain camera angles it would work. Then we provided a rod arm, rod-puppeted by himself, so he could actually hold onto a rod that came out of the elbow, and that was very convenient, because as he's acting and gesturing with his arms and moving about, he can pick up things, clap his hands or hands and stump together. Then Peter Kuran took out the rod stuff from the film.

"Later you see the same character with a metallic, sort-of battle-gear arm armature, basically meant to be like a robotic arm, but more with a RoboCop kind of feel to the design. We designed that glove and then built it. Basically it was a glove that the actor wore that made him look like he had a steel glove on."

If the metal hand harkens back to ROBOCOP, all those scattered bodies and red, red Karo syrup are bound to call to mind both ROBO and the splatterific TOTAL RECALL. "I must say: [Verhoeven] likes a lot of blood. Funny, his personality—he's very, very passionate about everything he does, and he'll do anything to get what he wants. You know, we couldn't put enough blood on things. It's very explosive, the way ROBOCOP was. It's that kind of thing; he just likes a lot of powerful images." □



# ANASTASIA

**20th Century Fox prepares to take a slice of the Disney pie.**

**T**he Russian Revolution: a government overthrown, a family torn apart, a country in turmoil—what a perfect setting for an animated film! Sure, it doesn't have the cuddly elements usually associated with the medium, but the filmmakers behind ANASTASIA, the first feature from Fox's new animation studio, saw the story as a natural.

"Animation is a film medium that tells legends, mythologies, and fairy tales very well," said the film's co-director Don Bluth (THE LAND BEFORE TIME). "The story of ANASTASIA that we've chosen to tell is not documentary. This story tells the journey of a young girl who is trying to find out who she is, and within that journey, she begins to change, and that has a very *Pygmalion* theme."

Producer Maureen Donley, a veteran of Disney studio, with THE LITTLE MERMAID and TOY STORY to her credit, was attracted to ANASTASIA, because of her own personal con-

by  
*Mike  
Lyons*

nection to the story. "ANASTASIA has always been a fascination for me, since I was a kid and saw the 1956 movie," she said. "It sort of sent me on this search for all things Romanov. When this came along, there was, for lack of a better word, a tell-tale shiver that I felt. There was a real charge to this story. We didn't know exactly what it was and exactly how to reveal it and take advantage of it, but, for sure, the charge was there."

Donley also adds that as the story was analyzed, a familiar paradigm began to reveal itself. "If you put aside most of the preconceptions and start taking it apart, we saw that there was a lot of stuff that covers the same ground as fairy tales, most especially in terms of abandonment and fear of abandonment and how we deal with that. It's

something that's innate to the human condition that no soul on this planet escapes."

Set in Russia in the early part of the 20th Century, the film centers on eight-year-old Princess Anastasia, who is living a charmed life in the czar's palace with her family. One evening, during a royal ball, the evil magician Rasputin places a curse on the entire Romanov family. The villain's prophesy comes to fruition late that night, when a mob storms the palace, starting the Russian Revolution.

Anastasia and her grandmother, Marie, escape. The grandmother manages to board a Paris bound train, but in the confusion, Anastasia is swept up in the crowd and left behind, with nothing but the key to a music box that her grandmother gave her (inscribed on the key is a promise that they will someday be together in Paris).

All this action occurs within the film's first moments. Much as in Disney's recent films (like THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME), the filmmak-



ers behind ANASTASIA knew that this prologue would be incredibly important in pulling the audience into the story. "That's our hook," said the film's other co-director Gary Goldman, who has been a long time Bluth collaborator since 1982's SECRET OF NIMH. "That's the scene that sits you down in your seat and makes you say, 'My God. What's going to happen to this little girl?' We establish many things in the opening. You introduce almost every character. We set a lot of things up for the audience in that sequence, and at the same time we tried to move it quickly enough so that you're not bogged down in this back story."

ANASTASIA then jumps ahead ten years and we now meet young, beautiful "Anya," as she leaves the orphanage where she was raised, and embarks on a journey to find her true home and family (she has no memory of her childhood and the only clue is the key she now wears as a necklace). In many animated films (Disney's SLEEPING BEAUTY comes to mind), the heroine often becomes the most passive character in the film, overshadowed by the villain and/or sup-

In one of the film's exciting highlights, an out of control train speeds over a cliff, courtesy of a little computer animation.







Above: In Paris, Anya (Meg Ryan) prepares to stake her claim to being Anastasia. Below: Rasputin (Christopher Lloyd) places a curse on the royal family that causes the Russian Revolution. Bottom: Anya, unaware that she really is Anastasia, is talked into "impersonating" the lost princess by a young con man named Dmitri (John Cusack) and his partner Vladimir (Kelsey Grammar).

porting players, but Goldman knew they couldn't let this happen with Anastasia. "What we really tried to do was create a proactive character. We talked about what women have gone through here in America for the past hundred years, and we kept using the buzzwords that we wanted to make Anastasia a '90s woman.' She's aggressive but not rude."

"She needed to be modern," added Maureen Donley. "She needed to plug into the reality of Twentieth-Century life. Part of that was her taking responsibility for her own life and being an active player in it. The movie is called ANASTASIA, so she's got to drive the story."

The first friend Anya makes along the way is a puppy named Pooka, whom she, of course, immediately takes as her sidekick and confidant. Anya then crosses paths with Dmitri, a servant boy who helped her escape, but they don't recognize one another. Dmitri, now grown up as a cocky con artist, sees a way to capitalize on the "Rumor in St. Petersburg" that the Princess Anastasia might be alive. Along with his sidekick, an ex-aristocrat named Vladimir, Dmitri convinces

Anya that she could be the lost Princess, and she agrees to accompany them to Paris to claim her lost heritage. Unbeknownst to Anya, Dmitri actually has the lost music box.

"This young man has a journey that he's on," said Goldman. "He starts off as that servant boy in the palace, on the outside looking in. He sees all this pageantry but cannot be a part of it. Then, as he grows up after the revolution, he's become a con man, trying to get money and swindle. He wants to be rich and maybe get on the inside to be with those who had it one time. He starts out as a likable con man, and he's going to change; he's going to give up his dream for someone he fell in love with."

This sort of attention was given to all of ANASTASIA's characters, supporting and otherwise. "We have a lot of dialogue during our story meetings about each of the characters," said Goldman. "We try to give each of them a three-dimensional personality. Each of these characters has their own story. Everybody has a history and a journey that they're going on through life."

Anya and Dmitri's journey







Dmitri the con man takes on a more courageous pose when the train to Paris speeds out of control.

to Paris takes an unexpected turn when Rasputin, quite literally, awakens from the dead (thanks to help from his droll sidekick, Bartok the bat). The villain then sets out to stop Anastasia and continue his curse against the Romanov family.

The filmmakers also knew that a good way to measure their heroine was by the strength of her foe, who in this case is one of the most notorious names in history. "It's a name a hundred years old that's somehow survived in people's imaginations," said Donley. "What we tried to do was incorporate the essence of him and why he was fascinating and use that in our story."

"We had several meetings about where we were going to go with this character," remembered Goldman. "At first, we had a different character, by the name of Molotov, who was actually the sergeant of the team who went in and assassinated the [Romanov] family. We had fooled around with this character, and Don had done some great designs for him, wearing a military costume. We looked into how [Molotov] was suffering, because he had missed a member of the Romanov family."

Bluth, Goldman, and company soon realized that ANASTASIA's story required something more "animated." Explained Goldman, "We said, 'We need some magic. We've got a concept that we're trying to bring to fruition that isn't necessarily an animated project.' So we started doing research and reading about Rasputin."

In the film, Rasputin not only places a curse that sparks the Russian Revolution; also—because his curse isn't carried out—he becomes trapped in a hellish limbo where, in a gruesome running gag, his body parts have difficulty staying put (at one point, Bartok exclaims, "Gee, that popped right out there, didn't it?" after catching one of the villain's eyes). "Bartok is Don's personal addition to the film," said Goldman. "He kept thinking, if we're going to have animated characters, let's come up with something different and unique."

While Anya and Dmitri stay one step ahead of Rasputin, a romance blossoms between them, and he soon realizes that this peasant girl is in fact the lost Princess. Dmitri presents Anya before Marie when they arrive in Paris. The grandmother has her suspicions, until she spots the key around her granddaughter's neck, and they are reunited. Anastasia's journey is not over yet, however; Rasputin soon lures her into the gardens, which come alive, pushing her into the villain's evil hands, and she is forced to face the sorcerer, in order to save herself and her family.

To bring such a story to the screen, the filmmakers knew that, in addition to pencils and paper, their most powerful weapon would be research. "You need to study real life to create art," said Goldman. "That's what

we've tried to do here. If Europeans see this, they are going to recognize some very familiar places."

This is because, in January of 1995, Goldman took a trip to Russia and was able to study St. Petersburg up close, including the Catherine Palace (where the film's opening takes place). He and his team took 3,600 photos of the building, then took a helicopter ride over the city, in order to examine its layout and architecture. "There was not a lot available in books," added Goldman, "so the photographs actually helped the layout artists and set designers."

Also helping flesh out the production is an impressive roster of recognizable voices, including John Cusack as Dmitri, Kelsey Grammar as Vladimir, Angela Lansbury as grandmother Marie, Christopher

Lloyd as the villainous Rasputin, Bernadette Peters as the optimistic Sophie and Meg Ryan as Anastasia herself.

"She's great," said Donley of Ryan's performance, "Because she's funny and quirky and completely female, and at the same time, she's quite active; she's not wilting in a corner." The producer also adds that, although the two actors worked in separate recording studios, Ryan and Cusack have a tremendous amount of chemistry. "They have an energy, a charm and an easy 'contemporariness,' without slipping into being anachronistic. It still maintains a level of reality."

Donley noted that by far the biggest vocal influence was actor Hank Azaria. Most famous for his role as the houseboy in last year's THE BIRDCAGE and for the numerous, Mel Blanc-like voices on TV's THE SIMPSONS, Azaria helped breathe life in the sardonic sidekick, Bartok. "We were on one track and had one image in our head. Then we said to him, 'What are your thoughts?' and he came out with this concept. I mean, it was magic."

Goldman recalled, "When his first readings came back, personally, I wasn't sure if it was going to work. It was so dry it sounded like he was reading the line instead of acting the line. Then, when we laid it down next to Christopher Lloyd's [dialogue], we knew that it was funny. You have one manic character set off against

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"That just popped right out there, didn't it?" says henchman Bartok the Bat to the living dead Rasputin, who has trouble maintaining his body parts.





# The Don of Animation

*A brief history of Don Bluth's post-Disney career.*

By Mike Lyons

Don Bluth still remembers when he left the big ship. Actually, this is how the animation director recalls the day in 1979, when he and a handful of fellow animators resigned and led a walk out from the Disney studio. "Leaving Disney, at that period, was much like getting off the Queen Mary into a little dingy and sailing into the fog," said Bluth. "We didn't know where we were going. We were young, naive, and ambitious enough to think that we could make a great picture, and everyone would see that and beat a path to our door."

The perseverance in that little, fog-bound dingy eventually led to Bluth's becoming one of the most recognizable names in animation, thanks to AN AMERICAN TAIL (1986) and 1988's THE LAND BEFORE TIME, two of the medium's most successful features. Now, many in the industry associate Bluth's name not only with the word animation but also with the well-worn phrase, "come-back." ANASTASIA, which Bluth co-directed with longtime partner Gary Goldman, could signal a return to glory for the Disney expatriate.

Bluth has had a life-long love affair with animation. Born and raised in El Paso, Texas, he always saw this as a career goal. "I knew from the time I was about three-years-old that this was the thing I was most attracted to," said Bluth. "I just followed that star for the longest time. Many times, I tried to detour from it, to go do the 'more logical thing.' I even thought I might be a dentist at one time. But I kept coming back to it, because something inside me kept saying, 'This is what you were supposed to do with your life.'"

After he graduated from high school, Bluth's family



Nicodemus, leader of the rats, gives counsel to Mrs. Brisby in 1982's THE SECRET OF NIMH, the first feature from Don Bluth (inset) after leaving Disney.

moved to Santa Monica, California. Bluth took this opportunity to take a portfolio of his work over to the nearby Walt Disney studios in Burbank. He accepted a job there as an in-between (the person who does the drawings "in-between" the animator's key drawings). At this time, work was under way at Disney on SLEEPING BEAUTY, and Bluth notes that the mood at the studio, while under the watchful eye of Walt, was much different than the later, tumultuous years. "It was such a delightful experience. He was a man who had honest visions and was trying to lead us very well."

Bluth left Disney in 1956, to continue his education at Brigham Young University (he continued to work summers at Disney). After graduation, he and his brother began a theater company in Santa Monica, but still the "star" of animation kept beckoning. He re-entered the industry again at the television animation studio, Filmation but returned to Disney in 1971.

Within two years, Bluth was promoted from Directing Animator to Producer-Director, working on such films as ROBIN HOOD (1973), THE

RESCUERS (1977), PETE'S DRAGON (1977), and the featurette THE SMALL ONE (1978). Unfortunately, Bluth noted a change in the air at Disney, "It was very corporate and marketing centered, but I stayed for another nine years. I watched it go into a decline in those nine years, and finally we just kept making the same picture over and over again."

Frustrated, Bluth, along with Goldman and animator John Pomeroy, resigned and led a walk out of eleven animators on September 13, 1979, in the midst of production on THE FOX AND THE HOUND, decimating the studio's then small animation unit. Bluth and his peers suddenly found themselves learning how to navigate a dingy through the dense fog of Hollywood. While working at Disney, Bluth and a few other animators produced a twenty-five minute featurette entitled BANJO, THE WOODPILE CAT (1979) the story of a country kitten, who runs away to the city. The film was made during nights and weekends in Bluth's garage, over a five-year period. BANJO wasn't screened theatrically, but instead televised by ABC. However, it did help

Bluth, Goldman and Pomeroy start up their own independent production company.

Their first assignment was a two-minute animated sequence for the live-action musical XANADU (1980), but this was in fact a warm up for their first full-length feature, 1982's THE SECRET OF NIMH. Based on the book, MRS. BRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH, the film proved to be an impressive debut, and caught the attention of critics and animation buffs, as the film told the story of a widowed mouse trying to keep her home safe, with help from escaped laboratory animals.

"For whatever reason, SECRET OF NIMH didn't really connect at the box office," said Bluth. "I guess it wasn't really marketed very well. So, we felt like we had failed."

This may be why Bluth decided to take animation in a new direction. In the early '80s, Pac-Man was more popular than any cartoon character, and Bluth became the first animator to capitalize on the success of arcade games. His new studio produced animation for DRAGON'S LAIR, the world's first animated video game (the animated information was stored on laser disks inside each machine). It was so popular that Bluth soon produced animation for another game, SPACE ACE, which was not as successful, and soon arcade games went the way of pet rocks. For Bluth, it was back to film.

In a bit of serendipity, it was around this time that composer Jerry Goldsmith brought THE SECRET OF NIMH to the attention of Steven Spielberg. "Steven looked at it and said, 'Wow, I thought the 'Golden Age' of animation was over,' and I felt that was a terrific compliment," noted Bluth. "He sought us out and said, 'Could we make a picture together?' We, of course, jumped at the



chance.”

The two joined forces for 1986's *AN AMERICAN TAIL*. The story of young mouse Fievel's immigration to America drew mixed reviews but proved to be immensely popular, for which Bluth acknowledges the generosity of Steven Spielberg, "Steven provided an arena; he provided the money and plenty of ideas."

*AN AMERICAN TAIL* set a then record for an animated film, when it earned \$45 million at the box office, causing many in the animation industry to sit up and take notice. "I think what happened is that everyone smelled money," added Bluth. "It happened around *AMERICAN TAIL*, and that woke up the sleeping giant. [Disney] made *MERMAID* and *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, and suddenly they got very interested in their competition, which made them try even harder. In that effort, they did something that put a sparkle on the water."

After *AMERICAN TAIL*, Bluth relocated, joined forces with businessman Morris Sullivan, moved his operation to Ireland, and formed Sullivan-Bluth studio. The new studio's first film was *THE LAND BEFORE TIME* (1988), which was produced in conjunction with Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. The film told a *BAMBI*-like story of a group of young dinosaurs and their journey to the "Great Valley." *LAND* was immensely successful and nabbed the number one spot on its opening weekend, the same weekend that Disney's *OLIVER AND COMPANY* debuted. It established Sullivan-Bluth studio as a force to be reckoned with in animation.

"That was a tremendous buzz," said Bluth of his back-to-back hits. "What we learned during that period was that if you have the right marketing, your picture has a chance to get its own legs. There was a man named Brad Globe, who was working at Amblin at the time we did both the pictures, and he had a great idea, which was 'Let's have a marketing tie-in, so that the studio, Universal, doesn't have to pay for the entire exposure of this picture.' So he brought in McDonald's and

**"I know this," said Don Bluth, "all the bumps in the road are there for a reason: they teach you things. Usually, from those experiences, you're stronger."**



Though inferior to *SECRET OF NIMH*, *AN AMERICAN TALE*, about immigrant mouse Fievel, was a big success, thanks to an impressive marketing campaign.

got them excited about a symbiotic relationship with the studio. There was about \$50 million dollars spent in making the public aware of the pictures, just by the marketing tie-in people. That opened up a whole new vision of how to promote a motion picture."

Bluth's next feature, *ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN* (1989) was not as fortunate as his previous two films. Even with a unique story (a dog returns from heaven to do one last good deed) and a cast of voices that included Burt Reynolds, the film didn't fare well at the box-office. The studio's next film, *ROCK-A-DOODLE* (1992) was even more of a disappointment, telling the tale of a rooster, who leaves the farm for Vegas, becoming an Elvis-like superstar.

Around this time, Sullivan-Bluth began experiencing financial difficulties and, at one point, was forced to lay off 500 employees. "It was a hard thing when the studio went through all of its troubles in Ireland," Bluth said, somberly recalling the event. "It was very difficult—more so, because I felt

bad for all the people we had trained who weren't sure what they were going to do for a living. But, I am a great believer that God never shuts a door; he opens a window."

This "window" of opportunity came in the form of Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale *THUMBELINA*, which Bluth's studio produced for Warner Bros. in 1994. Despite mediocre box office, the film holds a special place in the director's heart. "It was a moment when my life was more full of song than any other time. Working with Barry Manilow [the film's song writer] was a great experience, and [the film] was beautiful to look at."

Bluth's next two films, *A TROLL IN CENTRAL PARK* (1993) and *THE PEBBLE AND THE PENGUIN* (1995), fared even less well than *THUMBELINA*, with both films barely getting a theatrical release. Shortly after this, Bluth and Goldman left their Ireland facility for Fox Animation (John Pomeroy headed back to Disney, and has since served as Supervising Animator of John Smith in *POCAHONTAS*).

At Fox, Bluth has been part of another start-up of a studio "from scratch." The 66,000 foot facility, located in Phoenix, Arizona, employs over 300 people and continues to grow in terms of artistry and technology. Bluth and Goldman are currently considering five different stories for their next project at Fox, which will be announced early next year.

As a part of this expanding studio and as co-director of *ANASTASIA*, the most heavily hyped non-Disney animated efforts since *AMERICAN TAIL*, Bluth said that it's been interesting to watch audiences respond once again to animation. "Whether it's animation or live-action, I believe that everyone loves a good story, particularly a story about themselves," said Bluth. "I love to hear a good story, and if it's satisfying, then I want someone else to hear the same story. I think that's what it is. It's not just animation and the look, style and tone of it. It really goes back to 'The play's the thing.'"

Many other animation studios, like Fox, have beefed up production pipelines. "Competition is always a good thing," admitted Bluth. "Every person is important; every person has some little bit of truth that everybody should see and hear. When all these artists get together under the umbrella of a studio and decide to make a picture, I think that they're going to make something that's noteworthy. Now, whether it's commercial—meaning it will make money—you don't know. But, I think competition is wonderful, because it keeps us all looking over our shoulder, slightly, to see how good a job can we really do. If you don't have competition, there's a tendency to get a little lazy and just glide on your past accomplishments."

Since launching off from Disney's big ship, Bluth has encountered somewhat choppy water, much of it riddled with disappointments, but adds that the journey has most definitely been worthwhile. "I know this," he said, "all the bumps in the road are there for a reason: they teach you things, and you learn from them. Usually, when you come back from those experiences, you're stronger." □



## BEST OF BLUTH

by Mike Lyons

Like the animation industry itself, Don Bluth's career has had many ups and downs. The release of *ANASTASIA*, his most ambitious film in years, seems like the perfect time to take a look back at this very eclectic filmography.

### BANJO, THE WOODPILE CAT (1979) ★

It's not very sophisticated, but this featurette (about a young kitten who gets lost in the big city) is made impressive by the fact that it was, quite literally, a homegrown production (made in Bluth's garage, over the period of five years). With a carbon-copy Disney style, derivative of *THE ARISTOCATS*, (including Scatman Crothers as the voice of the hero's mentor, Crazy Legs, an obvious knock off the previous film's Scat Cat) and a sometimes meandering story line, Bluth and his then fledgling artists seem to have made do just fine with what they had. Watching *BANJO*, one can see the filmmaker establishing the elements—offbeat characters, distinctive colors, young protagonist in trouble—that would become hallmarks of his later films.

### THE SECRET OF NIMH (1982) ★★★★★

What's most fascinating about Bluth's first full-length feature is its edgy, dark tone. Like *WATERSHIP DOWN* (1978) and even the live-action *BABE* (1995), *NIMH* tells a somewhat gritty and realistic tale, as widowed mother Mrs. Brisby tries desperately to move her family and home from impending doom. Using a palette of washed out, earth-tone colors and some truly gripping moments, Bluth ingeniously placed the hallmarks of classic animation in a decidedly non-classic setting, where it still seems perfectly at home. Ironically, this is what Disney would do years later with such blockbusters as *LITTLE MERMAID*. In *NIMH*, the merging of the two sensibilities is handled

The disappointing *ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN* (1989) marked the beginning of a downward trend.



**THE LAND BEFORE TIME (1988)** was something of a career high for Bluth. The *BAMBI*-like dinosaur tale earned good reviews and solid box office.

just as well. Bluth also set up moments filled with terrific cinematic flair (when was the last time you saw an animated film that had a compelling sword fight?) and great personality animation (most notably, the way Dom DeLuise's whimpering performance is melded with the character of Jeremy, the crow). *SECRET OF NIMH* is that rarity among animated films (especially those from outside the Disney realm) beautiful artistry and beautiful story telling. Bluth's first is still, by far, his best.

### AN AMERICAN TAIL (1986) ★★

Not since World War II has animation seen such politically incorrect characters (it's bad enough that the politician character has to be Irish, but drunk and Irish?). This was just one of the many holes in *TAIL*'s plot, along with a lack of a solid villain and multiple conclusions. Still, audiences found something to respond to. The story of Fievel's immigration to America was a subject never before embraced by animation, and Bluth, once again, showed off his penchant for colors (and, in this case, beautifully rendered backgrounds) and eccentric characters (love that accountant cockroach who counts coins for the villainous rat). These elements may not make for ground-breaking animation, but they do allow *TAIL* to be an entertaining ride.

### THE LAND BEFORE TIME (1988) ★★★★★1/2

Every stumbling block in *AMERICAN TAIL* was overturned in this second Spielberg-Bluth collaboration. Bluth took a chance making all the main characters youngsters (it was an opportunity for over-the-top cuteness); instead these pre-*JURASSIC PARK* dinos proved utterly charming in a story with the feel of a solid, fablesque "hero's journey." Topping it all off is a pleasingly brighter color palette and a haunting, choral score by James Horner. Like *NIMH*, *LAND BEFORE TIME* showed what a unique forum for artistry and story-telling animation is.

### ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN (1989) ★

In an ambitious, *HEAVEN CAN WAIT*-like story, a con artist mutt named Charlie (voice of Burt Reynolds) abandons heaven to go back down to earth but is given one last chance at redemption. Maybe it was the fact that such weighty life and death issues seemed too somber for animation, or the fact that, for the first time, Bluth seemed to let his production design get the best of him, but the whole film never gels the way it should. The busy backgrounds and scenes brimming with characters were often a distraction. Still, the director's arsenal of artists did their best, creating a hardened, Bayou atmosphere for the film, while taking time out from the story's frenzied pace for quieter moments and character development.

### ROCK-A-DOODLE (1992) 0

This could have been campy fun, but this convoluted, modern day *CHANTICLEER* story suffered from a muddled, at times almost incomprehensible, story line. Once again, the characters are graphically fun to watch, and the animation itself is colorful and fluid (except for the film's conclusion, which features some of the sloppiest combinations of live-action and animation ever); but such artistry, without story, is like watching fireworks without music—all flash, no fun.

### THUMBELINA (1994) ★

For this adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson, Bluth took a refreshing turn from the norm. The film's look has less in common with the Disneyesque visions, so prevalent in his earlier films, and instead is quite reminiscent of Max Fleischer's films of the '30's and '40's (especially 1941's *HOPPITY GOES TO TOWN*). Beautiful to look at, *THUMBELINA* was Bluth's most original vision since *NIMH*. Unfortunately, the animation artistry was married to a soggy and surprisingly slowly-paced plot that ultimately drags everything down, dampening ones enthusiasm for it.

### A TROLL IN CENTRAL PARK (1993) 0

Proof once again that Don Bluth's films are look so good, that watching them is often a frustrating experience. *TROLL* is imbued with so much artistic effort that you wish as much time had been taken with plot and character development. This tale of a Troll who is banished to New York City could have been a nice, modern day fairy tale, but the story is riddled with many missed opportunities (we never really see Manhattan, except for brief, background paintings). Ultimately, the film boils down to the standard hero vs. evil queen elements that we've seen in numerous animated films. No new surprises here.

### THE PEBBLE AND THE PENGUIN (1995) ★★

This story of innocent penguin Hubie and his journey to bring the perfect pebble to his one true love does contain some bizarre character design, distracting graphics, and a mediocre musical score, but it doesn't contain the weak story lines that ambushed *THUMBELINA* and *A TROLL IN CENTRAL PARK*. Wisely, the animators took full advantage of everything in this film from the antarctic setting, (which give way to two spectacular action sequences, one involving a giant leopard seal and another, in which Hubie and his sidekick Rocko are pursued by killer whales), to the voice cast (like *THE LION KING*'s Timon, Rocko gets most of the laughs as the street-wise brains of the outfit, and James Belushi's voice fits the character so perfectly, you'll wonder why he hasn't been used before in animation). *PEBBLE* may not have earned an honored place in the current animation resurgence, but it does serve as a ray of hope for Don Bluth fans. □

John Carradine provided the voice of the Great Owl in *SECRET OF NIMH*, a film which holds up well.







The amnesiac Anya, raised as a peasant orphan, does not realize that she is standing in front of her own family portrait in the former Romanov palace.

**“She’s great,” said producer Maureen Donley of Meg Ryan’s Anastasia. “She’s funny and quirky and quite active; she’s not wilting in a corner.”**

this other who is low-key and laid back. It turned out to be perfect.”

ANASTASIA also combines the realm of pen and ink with the structure of musical theater. The film’s score is by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, Broadway veterans, who are bringing E.L. Doctorow’s RAGTIME to the Broadway stage this winter. Donley, whose background is also in musical theater, said, “This [animation] resurgence in the past ten years owes a huge debt to musical theater. One of the tenants of that is that your songs are part of your story. They are not separate; they are an absolute integrated unit. For us, that meant that Lynn and Stephen were part of our creative process from the beginning.” This extra dynamic also allowed for expansion of story. “The beauty of music and what songs can do,” added Donley, “is that they give you this incredible shorthand to get inside a character’s head—about what they want and what they feel. At the same time, it allows you to impart information, so that you don’t stop for the song.”

ANASTASIA also incorporates another element of the animated feature that’s fast becoming a tradition: computers. From the detail of the falling snow and the music box, to a spectacular train wreck sequence, computer generated imagery was a major player in the film, even if Goldman and Bluth, both traditionalists in the medium, were hesitant on the technology’s role, at first. “Don and I used computers in our other films, and we were just

touching on it when we had our studio in Ireland. When we came here we realized that, obviously, this is the tool of the future, and we made a list for the technicians at Fox of what we wanted to do with computers. They came back to us and said, ‘Your list is twenty years old! Let’s make a list that will drive you into the Twenty-first Century.’ Don and I both said, ‘I dunno. We’re used to cameras and drawings and inking and painting and cels.’”

Reluctantly, Goldman and Bluth moved forward and were ultimately happy they did, finding out that the CGI was not all-encompassing to the film (for example, while the characters and effects were colored by computer, they were still hand drawn). The computer also assisted with “scene planning,” in which characters, especially crowds, could be hand animated and then repositioned within a scene by computer (complete with costume design). “The computer has, in my opinion, sped everything up,” concluded

Goldman. “What it’s done is, instead of lightening the burden, it’s created the ability for Don and I to go crazy. We can provide more details and production values than ever.”

With all of this propelling it, ANASTASIA has, like many animated features, taken on a very distinctive look and tone. “Since this is an epic story,” said Don Bluth, “we chose to do it in Cinemascope, and we chose to hide the graphics slightly, so it became more of a realistic look. It was more like getting involved in a live-action motion picture, where you forget the craft and just get involved with the story. Our paramount goal was to get the audience to feel certain things deeply.”

One of the things audiences may feel when watching ANASTASIA is surprise at just how realistic it does look. Like Disney’s POCAHONTAS (1995) and HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (1996), ANASTASIA seems in danger of being labeled too realistic for animation, although producer Donley said that this never crossed their mind during production. “Our initial approach was that the story was the primary thing and that all things needed to serve the story,” she said. “The look

that we came up with was the one we felt best served the story’s demands, in terms of the whole 20th Century setting and the fact that we weren’t in ‘Once upon a time’ land.”

Donley also added that this more realistic feel helps solidify ANASTASIA’s deep themes and messages. “We played around with the idea of ‘What is home, really?’ Maybe home’s not a place; maybe home is the people that you love—an interior thing, an emotional thing. We also liked the idea that, girl or boy, you’re responsible for building your own life. You can’t live in the past; the future is always beckoning. You have to move toward it, or you’ll be left behind. And, the idea that nothing is ever lost. It feels like it’s lost; it goes away; but it exists someplace, and sometimes it comes back to you.”

Now that ANASTASIA is moving to its final stage—a debut in theatres—Don Bluth reflected, “After making seven animated pictures, the thing I know is that you can never know what’s going to happen. With ANASTASIA, that one thing was the predictable. It was filled with serendipity and the discoveries along the path of making this film were things I would have never imagined.” Bluth found one of these surprises in the film’s setting. “Anastasia, not knowing she’s the Princess yet, makes a journey into Paris, which was a city just being born and awakening to new things,” said Bluth. “So much was going on, which contrasted to the fact that Russia was a world dying and Paris was a world coming to life. All of these little nuances and currents began to surface, which gave something to us, beyond just telling the plot points of the story; it’s describing the world in an era gone by and finding what is there in that era that we can learn from.” □

Bartok struggles with Rasputin magic relic. The talking sidekick character fills approximately the same role as Lago the parrot in Disney’s ALLADIN.





# THE LITTLE MERMAID

**Disney's heroine returns to confront Bluth's princess.**

By Mike Lyons

There's a scene in *THE LITTLE MERMAID* in which the film's heroine, Ariel, plaintively sings "Part of Your World"—expressing her need to rise out of the water, to be "Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun." One could metaphorically draw a parallel to how the Disney studio itself must have been feeling at this time. After almost two decades bordering on obscurity, the studio suddenly found itself on the brink of a comeback with 1989's *THE LITTLE MERMAID*. Like Ariel, the artists and animators were yearning for something more, such as the glory captured by Walt and the first generation of studio artists. November 14 sees the return of *THE LITTLE MERMAID* to the big screen, for a new generation to enjoy. Perhaps not coincidentally, the release comes just a week before Fox's *ANASTASIA*.

"There was a feeling of enthusiasm to be doing a fairy tale," *MERMAID*'s co-director John Musker recalled, "because one hadn't been done in so long." Ron Clements, the film's other co-director, added, "It hadn't been done since *SLEEPING BEAUTY*, even though fairy tales are so associated with Disney. It was the first time that a whole new generation was going back to the roots of where things began, such as with *SNOW WHITE*. We felt a certain intimidation, because we knew that this film might be compared with those—more so, because there would be similarities. At the same time, we wanted to put a new spin on it, so that it would reflect the new generation. Because of this, there was excitement about the movie from the beginning."

Clements added, however, that they did feel a certain weight on their shoulders as work on *MERMAID* began, "We still didn't know where animation was going. We were

coming off of a kind of down period. There was a sense with each film that this could be the last one. Things had been looking up with *GREAT MOUSE DETECTIVE* and *OLIVER AND COMPANY*, but I think there was a sense that there was a lot riding on *MERMAID*."

The film came to light at Disney after Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg came aboard at the studio and, along with Roy Disney, vowed to beef up the pipeline of animation production. Twenty members of their story department were given the challenge of finding ideas for future films. After this gauntlet was laid down, Ron Clements came across Hans Christian Anderson's *The Littlest Mermaid* while browsing through a collection of fairy tales. The story would go on to continue a collaborative spirit between Musker and Clements that began with 1986's *GREAT MOUSE DETECTIVE*. Clements remembered, "I pitched *LITTLE MERMAID* at a 'Gong Show' [the name given to creative meetings at Disney, at which story ideas are presented]. It went into development; then there was a question as to who would write the script. I knew John was a good writer, and I asked him if he would be interested in working together. From that, we've been

The slithering, scene-stealing Ursula the Sea Witch was one of many stand-out elements in *THE LITTLE MERMAID*, indicating Disney's return to form.



Disney's *THE LITTLE MERMAID* returns to theatres on November 14, a week before Fox's *ANASTASIA*.

working together since."

The relationship between *THE LITTLE MERMAID* and the Disney studio can actually be traced back to the 1940s, when Walt Disney himself considered doing a *LITTLE MERMAID* sequence for a live-action-animated feature based on the life of Hans Christian Anderson. Artist Kay Neilsen, who had helped create the incredible visuals for *FANTASIA*'s "Night on Bald Mountain" sequence, created wonderful inspirational art for the sequence, but the film went unproduced. When production began on the new *MERMAID*, the art work was unearthed and used for inspiration (and Neilsen received a posthumous credit).

Jeffrey Katzenberg, who came to animation with a background in live-action, knew that *LITTLE MERMAID* would have a wonderful visual foundation, but he wanted something more. "Jeffrey Katzenberg was very demanding on the film," recalled John Musker. "He was always challenging us. There was a feeling of trying to exceed what you had done before." The result is one of the most concise and well-thought out story lines in recent Disney history (despite a happy ending finale that differs from Anderson's darker original).

In the film, young Ariel (voice of Jodi Benson) wants so desperately to be part of the human world, and closer to Prince Eric, that she agrees to trade her voice to Ursula the sea-witch



## DISNEY'S SECOND GOLDEN AGE

by Mike Lyons

THE LITTLE MERMAID is splashing back into theatres for a new generation. With all that's happened at Disney Feature Animation, the re-release of the film that started the Disney animation resurgence, seems like a good opportunity to look back upon the films of this ongoing Second Golden Age.

### THE LITTLE MERMAID

(1989) ★★★★★

THE GREAT MOUSE DETECTIVE, WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT, and OLIVER AND COMPANY kicked things off, but this return to the good ol' fairy tale brought back so much of what had been missing from Disney animation that's it's no mystery audiences were pleasantly caught off guard. The lead character, Ariel (a beautiful vocal performance by Jodi Benson) with her teenage angst and headstrong determination; the campy, torch song villainous Ursula; and the eccentric supporting characters of Sebastian, Scuttle the sea gull and Flounder are marvels of personality animation. Coupled with this is one of Disney animation's greatest scores, which revived the dead art form of the movie musical ("Under the Sea" is still the most colorful and exhilarating of all the Disney show-stoppers). Watching today, one can see how directors Ron Clements and John Musker brilliantly knitted the Disney hallmarks with moments of new sensibility. This was a new generation's SNOW WHITE.

### THE RESCUERS OF DOWN UNDER (1996) ★★★1/2

The first and only theatrical sequel from Disney animation has been unfairly overlooked. Directors Mike Gabriel and Hendel Butoy showed ingenious skills in their depiction of the vast Australian outback—the opening scene, in which the film's young protagonist, Cody, rides upon the back of Marahute, the giant golden eagle, is a wonderfully

The most recent effort from the LITTLE MERMAID directing team of John Musker and Ron Clements was this year's HERCULES.



Disney's Second Golden Age hit its stride with BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, the first animated feature to be nominated for Best Picture of the Year.

dizzying, point of view experience for the audience. The film also contains some beautifully executed action-sequences (as when the heroic mice, Bernard and Bianca, climb aboard the villain McLeash's tank) which have a gripping, kinetic, almost ROAD WARRIOR (believe it or not) feel to them. It may not have had show-stopping tunes (in fact it didn't have any songs at all—another Disney animated first), but RESCUERS DOWN UNDER warrants a larger audience.

### BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (1991) ★★★★★

The "Tale as old as time..." made history with its Oscar nomination, but what's most amazing is the way directors Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise made viewers forget they were watching "moving drawings" by applying live-action sensibilities to the story. Each shot is a marvel (an opening scene in which the camera pulls back from the cowering Beast, framed in a castle window, and the swirling feel of the ballroom dance are especially amazing). Ashman and Menken's score is more Broadway than ever, with each tune topping the last, and the new generation of artists once again sink their teeth into some wonderful personalities. Animator Glen Keane solidified his future Disney Legend status with the Beast, a complex, brooding character with a striking appearance and some of the most soulful eyes this side of Bambi. In all, this was the perfect way for the Disney renaissance to hit its stride.

### ALLADIN (1992) ★★★★★

It could have been subtitled "And Now, For Something Completely Different." Directors Musker and Clements were allowed to cut-loose, and they also used a distinctive style (thick, linear designs reminiscent of caricaturist Al Hirschfeld) that carried through to all areas of the film (characters, backgrounds, props, etc.)—something not done since 1959'S SLEEPING BEAUTY. This allowed ALADDIN to not only be a wonderful celebration of the cartoony impossibilities of animation, but also to inject Disney animation with contemporary sensibilities for the first time. Thanks largely to Robin Williams' hysterical, stream-of-consciousness vocal performance coupled with Eric Goldberg's animation—some of the most brilliant ever put on screen—the studio and the medium moved to a new level.

### THE LION KING (1994) ★★★★★

Many were stunned at just how well this original story fared at the box office, becoming the most successful animated film of all time. But, it's really no surprise. Using one of the studio's strongest story lines and some of the most memorable and eccentric characters in some time, LION KING told Disney's most human story, without using one single, solitary, human character. Simba's "hero's journey" from cub to adult not only brought back the feel of the studio's finest films, it also harkened back to those deep-themed moralistic fables spun during everyone's childhood. Elton John and Tim Rice's ebullient songs and Hans Zimmer's hauntingly beautiful score help to back-up the most flawless animation and artistry the new generation has produced (with Scar, Andreas Deja emerged as animation's true method actor). Although a scant three years old, LION KING already truly deserves a place on the Disney classic mantle.

### POCAHONTAS (1995) ★★★

"THE LION KING's younger sister" was unfairly measured against the previous film's 1994 box-office receipts, even months before it opened. Maybe its story lagged in sections; its history wasn't always right; and some of the cute cartoon characters didn't seem at home

beside the more realistic humans; still, there was a certain amount to like here. The film's highly stylized look (beautifully realized by art director Mike Giamo) wisely kept the film in its animated realm and hid its more realistic moments. POCAHONTAS also ranks as a watershed at Disney, with its use of subtler animation. Take, for example, the moment when John Smith and Pocahontas first meet, by a waterfall. There's no singing, no magic carpet ride, and yet, we are still glued to the scene's quiet power. It's not perfect, but POCAHONTAS is a testament to how much Disney animation has grown in terms of story telling, entertainment, and art.

### THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (1996) ★★★★★

The only "bomb" to make \$100 million. Some family audiences couldn't warm up to this animated adaptation of Victor Hugo's bleak novel, and critics began sharpening their pens weeks before the film opened. Disney's HUNCHBACK is, however, destined to be this generation's FANTASIA: a groundbreaking film that failed to generate much attention, it isn't just terrific animation; it's a terrific film.

HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME showed Disney attempting a more adult approach to animation.



### HERCULES (1997) ★★★1/2

Clements and Musker recreated the energy they had used in ALADDIN in this wonderfully frenetic ride that is, quite possibly, the funniest film to ever come out of the Disney studio. With a strikingly original look (derived from artist Gerald Scarfe, which looked right at home in Greek Mythology) the animators found a balance between the zip-bang, slapstick world of cartoons and the sensitive, thematic edge of fairy tales and fables. HERCULES also gave audiences yet another great blend of vocal performance and animated artistry. James Woods rapid-fire turn as Hades was utilized perfectly by animator Nick Ranieri and shaped as, quite literally, an explosive personality. Despite a surprisingly tepid performance at the box-office (it deserved better) HERCULES was a welcome return to animation's cartoon roots. □





Right: the show-stopping "Under the Sea" production number. Above: Ariel and Scuttle rescue Prince Eric from drowning.



(Pat Carroll), in exchange for human legs, for three days. After this, the Mermaid's voice and soul are the property of Ursula, if Ariel does not win Eric's love. Ariel agrees to this, against the wishes of her father King Triton and her crustacean equivalent of Jiminy Cricket, Sebastian the crab.

Another new dynamic in MERMAID was its score, with music by Alan Menken (who would become a Disney regular) and lyrics by the late Howard Ashman, whom John Musker credits with injecting the film with something unique. "He brought a new sensibility, in terms of how he saw music weaving into the story; that really did set all this off. Howard's involvement was a watershed, a turning point. We had never done anything like that before. It was a big learning experience for all of us.

"Working with Howard made us feel as if this was something special—the idea of having a musical team right in the next room, so as you were story boarding something, you could go next door and talk with Howard and Alan. Then, they could come over and see the art work and say, 'There's something there that I can use.' In a way, that was a throwback to a system that was around in the '30's, but had gone away."

THE LITTLE MERMAID also allowed the studio's new generation of animators to sink their teeth into solid characters. Mark Henn and Glen Keane split the animating duties for the film's heroine, fashioning her as sort of the All-American teenage girl next door, with fins, of course (the color of Ariel's

fin, by the way, was a special concoction of blue and green, created by Disney's color department, who dubbed the color, naturally, "Ariel"). For King Triton, animator Andreas Deja based the protective parent's personality on the way his own father reacted when Andreas' sisters started dating. Ruben Aquino, studied live-action reference footage of an octopus, in order to get the slithering movements when animating Ursula.

According to Aquino, it was with THE LITTLE MERMAID that he realized how much an impact the new Disney animators were having. "When I started at Disney, the whole atmosphere in feature animation, and animation in general, was kind of downbeat and we thought it was just a matter of time before all animation got sent over-seas, or feature animation became economically non-viable. Then, within less than ten years, it's turned around completely. When we did MERMAID, I was giving a talk and someone asked

me, 'What's your goal at Disney?' I told them that I would love it if I could be part of making Disney films as good as they used to be. We may not have achieved the level of animation that they achieved in the 'Golden Age,' but actually on a lot of levels, I think we have recaptured some of that past glory."

THE LITTLE MERMAID not only revived some of this glory, the film's success also extended well beyond the screen. In March of 1989, MERMAID won Academy Awards for Best Song ("Under the Sea") and Best Score, becoming the first Disney animated feature since 1941's DUMBO to win an Oscar. Merchandise and collectibles still attract consumers (including, of course, a new wave that's come out for the re-release); the film inspired a popular attraction, THE VOYAGE OF THE LITTLE MERMAID, at the Disney/MGM Studios in Florida; and Ariel and company were even translated into a popular

Saturday morning cartoon TV show.

"For me, personally," added Musker, "as far as any sense of, 'Will the public like this?' or 'Will this be a big hit?' I honestly had no sense of that. We were very innocently trying to just make the best film that we could. In hindsight, you can see how things have worked out, but I had no idea that it would reach the audience that it has and move into some of the pop cultural things, the way it did."

Since LITTLE MERMAID, Musker and Clements (at Disney, the two are simply referred to as "Ron n' John") have added to Disney's resurgence by co-directing 1993's ALADDIN and this year's HERCULES. "Directing for Disney is a hugely collaborative medium," added Musker. "Working with such an arsenal of artists is just daunting and wonderful as directors. Whether it's animators, background painters, layout artists, computer graphics people, the clean-up staff or the ink and paint people, everybody really has a high degree of professionalism. They just always want to do the best job and challenge themselves."

Musker also noted that it's now wonderful to see such activity from a medium that almost became a dead art form in the film industry. "At one point, they were considering charging higher admission prices [for animated films], because people weren't going to them and they couldn't afford to keep making them. Then, gradually it turned around. Now, it's fun to have your movies play world wide and really move into the mainstream." □

The scene-stealing Sebastian the Crab confers with Ariel and her friend Flounder. (By the way, how does she keep that flip in her hair underwater?)





# OFFI

## Corporate downsizing

Fans of Cindy Sherman's photography will probably not be entirely surprised to hear she has directed a horror film. The subject of numerous museum exhibits, gallery showings and photography books, her work has always had a certain cinematic quality to it. In "Untitled Film Still #56" (1980), for instance, the photo appears to have been shot with a motion-picture camera. It was not, according to Ms. Sherman, who was promoting OFFICE KILLER with a series of interviews at The Toronto International Film Festival. Besides her series duplicating the look of movie stills, Sherman has also used herself as model for photos of ancient portraits, super-imposed with modern pho-

Dorine Douglas (played by Kane) has her whole life wrapped up in her job. Having no friends, she spends all her time either at the office or at home taking care of her aging and crippled mother, Carlotta (Alice Drummond). Many of her co-workers think her strange and unlikable, especially Kim Poole (Molly Ringwald), who hates Dorine and badmouths her to other employees.

Molly Ringwald describes her character as "basically the office tart." Her free-wheeling attitude towards life is in dark contrast to Carol Kane's intensely withdrawn portrayal of Dorine—whose psychological problems date back to the unwanted attention she got from her slimy late father while her mother refused to hear her cry for help. Her father's death in a car accident which crippled her mother was the onset of an obsession with death and a dependency on her by her mother that resulted in her need for a steady job and a chance to get away from her mother for hours during the day. Yet as her only close relative, the adversarial relationship with her mother comes to an abrupt halt when she passes away, and though Dorine shows no affection towards her mother, the death of her last living tie to reality sends her even further over the brink.



tography, exhibiting Sherman's off-beat sense of humor, which is also a big part of her film.

OFFICE KILLER stars Carol Kane as a mousy little copy-editor at a publishing house. After 16 years of diligent and efficient work, the powers upstairs have decided on corporate downsizing. Many of her co-workers are soon to lose their jobs, already having been demoted to part-time status, and

On the day Dorine receives her notice of downsizing, she commits her first murder of a co-worker. This begins a bizarre killing spree that results in Dorine finally gaining some friends to party with, as one by one the corpses are assembled around her, decaying while she converses with them and eats popcorn as they watch her favorite shows. Norah Reed, (Jeanne Tripplehorn) the one forced by management to deliv-



Above: Molly Ringwald stars as Kim Poole ("the office tart," according to the actress) in OFFICE KILLER. Below: Deranged Dorine Douglas (Carol Kane) enjoys television with her new "friends." Right: Debut director Cindy Sherman.





# OFFICE KILLER

takes on a demented new genre meaning.

er the bad news, feels sorry for the repressed and forgotten Dorine and tries to befriend her. But Dorine, having discovered a secret about Norah, is sending her anonymous e-mail messages of implied blackmail while diverting suspicion of murder from herself with continuing messages from one of her supposedly "missing" victims. Yet with all the people disappearing, the only one who suspects Dorine of anything is the cynical but flaky Kim, to whom no one listens.

Cindy Sherman's approach to this film was not what the public or her fans might expect, and it must have been difficult to make the transition from graphic artist to filmmaker. As she explained it: "I thought it would be easier, in a way, to use actors who had name recognition, just because they would be a little more professional, having all that experience behind them. But on the other hand, they do have more ego, I suppose, than unseasoned [newcomers]. Especially with four women on the set who are stars in their own right [Barbara Sukowa plays editor-in-chief Virginia Wingate], I realized there is definitely a juggling of who you have to pamper. It just seemed like everybody needed attention, even when we're not shooting a scene with that person. I had never expected that the director would become like 'Mom.' It's like you're dealing with all the egos of your little children, trying to make everybody happy. It wasn't so much a problem as it was interesting. In the way I work I'm not used to telling anybody what to do. I don't have any assistants at all, even in my studio. It's just me and the camera. Aside from the cast, just having a crew around is such a new experience, but very helpful. That process is so labor-intensive on so many lev-

**"There are expectations that go along with this genre that the film doesn't have. It evokes horror stereotypes without really scaring you. It's more psychological."**



One victim of Dorine Douglas' ruthless form of "corporate downsizing" in OFFICE KILLER, which goes into limited release on December 3.

els, that I realized I was really thankful there were people whose job it was to just worry about props or camera dollies."

Though film would seem a logical extension of her previous art, Sherman says she had to be talked into it, but is glad she was. "The money, apparently, was there before I was even involved with it. My producer, Christine Vachon was approached by Good Machine, another production company. They had money from investors who wanted to do a series of low-budget horror films."

The script was written by Sherman and Elise MacAdam, yet Sherman claims no political agenda for the inclusion of the downsizing issue. That point was inserted into a later rewrite of the script at the request of

higher-ups. "It was difficult for me," she admitted, "because I don't think narratively, I just think visually. What I brought to the story was influenced by the way I work in my studio, surrounded by all these plastic body parts and transposing that into a realistic situation. I wanted it to take place in the city because I wanted to sleep in my own bed at the end of the day. I didn't want to be in some motel in the country-side."

One might assume that Sherman would be more comfortable behind the camera than directing a performance, but she dispels that. In fact, she says she liked working with the actors best of all. "The thing that would throw a wrench into the whole system," she continued, "would be after me, the cine-

matographer and my first A.D. would plot out the scene, imagining how we thought it should be shot, the actors would come in with their own ideas about where they should stand, how they should act. But mostly, it was really fun."

Her approach to filming a story about a serial killer—including such other elements as sexual abuse of children and downsizing at corporations—was definitely not run-of-the-mill. "I definitely didn't want to do some MTV special effects thing," she revealed, "On the other hand I really didn't know what I wanted visually from it. I wanted some kind of unusual framing, that hopefully would create some kind of tension. I was hoping to do a stylized thing like Dario Argento. Unfortunately, we didn't really have the budget to get the kind of close-up lenses and zoom lenses that would've been ideal. In some cases, we didn't even have the budget to re-do things until they were the way I wanted, because we were under time limitations."

Though she chose not to go over the top with the violence and gore, she worries that some horror fans may be disappointed. "There are certain expectations that go along with this genre," Sherman mused, "that this film doesn't really have. Ideally, I wish it did function on a more terrifying level, the way HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER did. That doesn't mean I'm not happy with the way it turned out. I like the fact that it's evoking horror film stereotypes, but not really scaring you. It is more psychological horror, watching what [Dorine] does and how her mind works."

Many films on this subject in recent years have deliberately pulled back from trying to top

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# FACE/OFF

## Hong Kong helmer John Woo scores with this science-fiction themed action flick.

Lovingly caressing revolvers in each hand or stroking pump-action shotgun barrels, John Woo's heroes tap dance upon the fence between psychotic relief and chivalrous anti-heroism. (It is no surprise to find out that Woo taught dancing during his high school years in Hong Kong.) His action is wild and Woo-ly, and although his first two Tinseltown features (*HARD TARGET* and *BROKEN ARROW*) were tailored to American tastes, they were subliminally sprinkled with Woo's unmistakable specifications—or as we say in the film industry, "Wooisms."

But his latest effort, *FACE/OFF* has appeased the most exacting of Woo's Hong Kong fans and critics while indelibly capturing the fascination of general filmgoers. *FACE/OFF*'s narrative is a model of prescribed proficiency, a cool distillation of action conventions we know and love, rather than an automatic regurgitation of genre traditions.

Woo's brilliant actioner features John Travolta and Nicolas Cage portraying, alternately, an FBI agent and a mad terrorist whose battle entails the literal switching of faces. The film's double meaning has nothing to do with ice hockey; it reflects the futuristic, *HIGH NOON*-ish showdown of two men who have to do what a man has to do amidst the demented twists of a sophisticated science-fiction plastic surgery that is but a prelude to a mind boggling symphony of explosions, boat chases, and pyrotechnical ballet.

FBI agent Sean Archer (John Travolta) must go undercover to discover the location of a lethal biological weapon planted by



In a classic John Woo composition, the hero and villain (played by Nicolas Cage and John Travolta) mirror each others actions on opposite sides of a divided screen.

the sadistic terrorist-for-hire Castor Troy (Nicolas Cage). Radical surgery allows Archer to carry out his mission by receiving the transplanted face of the injured Troy, who lies in a coma after a shootout with FBI agents. It's a given that, as gravely injured as he is, the faceless Troy snaps out of his coma and forces the surgeons to give him the only available face, transforming him into Archer. As the bomb continues to tick, it becomes a high-stakes game of cat-and-mouse as both Archer and Troy, trapped in their enemy's body, try to save face—their own.

Woo was asked to direct the project five years ago but turned it down. Why did he change his mind? Woo divulged, "I really love the concept. Plus, I loved the challenge. The script was ambitious, and it's the first time we see the actors play both the good guy and the bad guy.

"This project was offered to me when I first got here by Joel Silver

for Warner Brothers. But the draft was a totally futuristic sci-fi project and occurred two hundred years from now. I am not good at the scientific-technological thing; I am computer blind. I didn't think that I could do a good job on science fiction, so I passed on it. When I was filming *BROKEN ARROW*, the project was turned over to Michael Douglas' company; he and his partner approached me because I think Michael liked my style. I read the script, and it had a lot of changes—it was still futuristic but with a lot of heart. So I suggested to Michael that before I could direct this we should remove all the futuristic stuff and focus on the drama, making it more human. So, obviously, all the changes were made, and it was brought back to the present day. Because I learned from *BROKEN ARROW* that you spend too much time and money on effects, CGI, and minia-

tures. On *FACE/OFF* I wanted to spend

more time on the drama."

For those that came in late, Woo was born as Wu Yu Sen in 1946 in China; he took the Christian name of John (after John the Baptist) when a first grade teacher from Britain found it difficult to read her students' Chinese names. He entered the film industry in 1969 and in 1971 worked for Shaw Brothers as an assistant to swordplay director Zhang Che, which led to his first directorial effort in 1973. After a string of hit comedies and two kung-fu movies (including *HAND OF DEATH*, with a young Jackie Chan) at Golden Harvest, Woo left in 1983 to join Cinema City. What followed

was the Tsui Hark-produced *A BETTER TOMORROW*, which established a style of frenzied exaggeration, some of it flamboyantly outrageous, that has remained a hallmark of Woo's work ever since. His sheer joy in filmmaking is infectious. He thrives in the kinetic freneticism of a beautifully executed tracking shot, the bewitching allurements of city lights reflected on panes of glass, the frail poetry of the freeze frame, and the gutsy power of parallel editing. Woo's *THE KILLER*, *BULLET IN THE HEAD*, his Hong Kong version of *ONCE A THIEF*, and *HARD BOILED* are thematically coherent—undoubtedly the result of his sophisticated and completely cultivated sensibilities. They let you feel intelligent and simultaneously allow you to go nuts. How does Woo achieve this?

He uttered, "It's hard to find the perfect words to describe my style. Perhaps it is an operatic way of filming. My movies have so many styles. They are

BY CRAIG REID





Above: Cage as terrorist Castor Troy. Right: Troy takes the face of Travolta's FBI agent Sean Casey.

romantic, emotional, exciting, everything. Sometimes I see myself as a conductor of an orchestra, or a painter."

For a soft spoken man, who neither practices martial arts nor shoots a gun and who is essentially a mild-mannered, non-violent Christian, where did his poetic vision for operatic violence come from? Some of the answer lies in his childhood. Woo reminisced, "I have seen too much violence. I grew up in a violent world, lived in a bad neighborhood full of drug dealers and gamblers, and our family was poor. I am lucky to have great parents. My father was a scholar and loved Chinese culture. He taught me to live with dignity. We were even homeless for a couple of years and lived on the street. They couldn't afford to send me to school until I was nine years old. Then an American family who sent money to the church supported my school fees for six years. I have never met them. Without their help I would have been a different person. So this is also why I am so fond of the church.

"Then during the riots in Hong Kong of 1957 and 1967 created by the left wing, they set bombs off everywhere, and I saw people get shot by police—so many disasters and sad things. That's why in my movies, my kind of hero likes to help other people and sacrifice himself for the others. So here I put in my realistic feelings into the characters.

"In terms of action, I just

love doing action scenes. I usually see it as a ballet dance and use the music within the scene. Plus, I start the action with so much emotion. Let me give you an example. If I am shooting a scene where the good guy is shooting at the bad guy, I think of something like people getting killed in the street when I was a little child, or think of someone being killed in war. This makes me feel very angry, then sad, then upset. So when I see the scene of my hero shooting at someone"—as if struck by lightning, Woo's quiet disposition and voice become markedly excited—"then I imagine that the guy is the killer, or the murderer or a warlord, so I can put my past emotion of anger into the bad guy being shot. But then I also like to have fun because action to

me is like a cartoon. As a kid I watched too many cartoons, and cartoons are very violent."

Laughing, Woo admitted that TOM AND JERRY was a favorite, adding, "You know, the violence of the action in my movies is not always real. In real life, no one gets shot and spins around and dies like a dancer. Nobody can fly and dive down from the second floor and shoot a guy on the way down. I decided that things are like a cartoon and are also not real. The other thing is the way that I am using the camera and editing is pretty much like a musical, and I like to challenge myself in that every action sequence must be over the top and get better and better."

And that is what he delivers in FACE/OFF. Just when you think he has reached an appro-

priate end point, he takes his rocket ride to another destination. The film is an actor's dream in which Travolta and Cage spend most of their time acting as if in each other's bodies. Through a plot device of a microchip implanted in his larynx, Sean Archer is able to look and sound like Castor Troy—enough, maybe, to fool the sociopath's paranoid brother, who knows the hiding place of the biological weapon. For Troy, it's even trickier. In the guise of Travolta, he goes home to Archer's family and must pull the wool over the eyes of Archer's wife (Joan Allen as Eve) and their confused teenage daughter (Dominique Swain as Jamie) to convince them he is Sean. Eve is faced with a husband suddenly re-interested in romance after a six-year revenge spree (Troy accidentally killed Archer's son while aiming at Sean), and Jamie is now wowed by a cool father who not only asks what kind of protection she uses (he promptly provides her with a butterfly knife) but drags her overly rambunctious boyfriend out of his sports car window and pounds him into a quivering pile. Meanwhile, Archer (now played by Cage) is confronted by Troy's girlfriend (Gina Gershon) and pays softer attention to Troy's son (who becomes to Archer a surrogate for the son Troy took from him). We quickly are invited into the strange implications of a face swap as we investigate how

Director John Woo discusses a scene with stars Travolta (right) and Cage (left). The two actors imitated each other's gestures while switching roles.





much our appearance shapes our personality. It is this mirroring of each other's performance that forms the emotional foundation of the film.

Woo elaborated, "There are two emotional strings in this movie. First is the idea of good and evil. My feeling especially in this movie is that there is no real good guy or bad guy in this world. No one is perfect, you know. We can learn from the best and the worst. It is like a mirror. Good and evil always mirror each other. Of course the bad guy can also see himself as good, and the good guy can see himself as bad. That's why I make the two characters, good and bad. They both are not perfect. But in the meantime they also have something similar. No matter if they are good or bad they are both charming. It is my thinking that even the bad guy does better than the good guy because he is a better father. The other thing about this movie that I like is the family values in it. I think the real hero is the one who takes responsibility for his family or friends or for the one he loves. This is why I am so strongly emotionally tied to this film."

Regarding the religious significance that is a recurring thematic device in many of his films, Woo laughingly added, "Yes, in *FACE/OFF* we use Handell's *Messiah*; we have scenes in the church—the candles, the fluttering doves which represents purity, innocence and love. This church is the redemption and destiny, and it all balances the violence. You see, sometimes the church is heaven to me. When people fight in war, they turn Heaven to Hell. So that's why I use the church."

Woo was given much more freedom on *FACE/OFF* to make the film his way. "The producers and studio gave us their full support, and we could change [things] right away without asking anyone for approval. People now understand how I work."

One impromptu addition was a gesture Archer uses as a sign of love and recognition. Woo explained, "For the opening scene I thought if the father and child [Sean and son] are just riding, it's so anything. So then I came up with, 'How about having a family gesture?'

**"The violence in my movies is not real," said Woo. "Nobody can dive down from a second floor and shoot a guy on the way. These things are like a cartoon."**



In another piece of typical Woo imagery, terrorist Castor Troy (Cage) employs the two-gun technique—one in each hand—during a shoot out with the FBI.

Whoever is upset or unhappy, puts a hand over his face, pulls it down, and creates a happy face. John loved the idea. It became a dramatic gesture and a sort of recognition thing later in the film. I also designed some things for both actors, so after the switch they could mimic each other in each other's bodies. We spent some time on rehearsals to decide on the characters and how to evolve them. During the shoot, they learned and imitated from each other's form on tape, so they saw each other as good guy and bad guy. Whatever one did on the set, they would let the other know and then discuss if it was okay for one actor to introduce his own interpretation of the other actor's movements. It was quite amazing to see these great actors in action."

Woo can create action sequences with the best of them. He knows how to manipulate his characters with smooth contrasting elements; he comprehends when to let chaos rule and when to dictate orderliness while preventing the audience from losing sight of the story amidst the melange of flying bodies and firepower. He's ad-

dicted to freeze frames and Leone-esque close-ups of staring eyes (often used by Zhang Che in his sword films) to pinpoint emotional transitions about to happen. Marked with tonal turning points from wrenching emotion to crude comedy to violent action, a Woo film is just not a Woo film without his patented dramatic triangular structure; notably, two points of this tri-factorate equation include guns being defiantly pointed at one another's head. As Woo says, "It's a powerful metaphor for a ruthless world of paralyzing choices."

In *FACE/OFF*, this face off occurs several times: between Archer and Troy and their reflections in mirrors; between Archer, Troy, and Joan; then Archer, Troy, and Jamie. The remarkable humorous sensibility of these triangles hinges on Travolta's comedic timing. Woo trusts the power of his images to signal the shifts. Note the cool shot when Cage, in sunglasses, emerges in slow motion from his limousine with his long black overcoat eerily wafting in the breeze.

But the classic John Woo shot is a compositional split

screen in which apparent opposites mirror one another, erasing the line between protagonist and antagonist, lover and friend, cop and criminal. He loves pans and rack focusing to drive home the relationship between the foreground and background figures. With his action films, he is probably the first foreign filmmaker since Sergio Leone to be hailed as a legitimate heir to the traditions of a solidly American genre. Yet his dream project is to do a remake of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. One of the most famous scenes in this Chinese classic is when one of the heroes, Quang Gong (commonly seen on posters, calendars, and figurines as the red-faced, black-bearded kung-fu god), is carrying the baby emperor on horseback while mowing down most of the enemy's foot soldiers. At the end of the battle he eloquently notes that the baby didn't cry. We see this pop up in *HARD BOILED* and in *FACE/OFF* as Cage (playing Archer) carries Troy's son through blankets of gunfire, noting that the child doesn't cry out or scream during the melee.

Said Woo, "To me my films are like my children; that is why I am so faithful to my movies. But you know, before coming to this country, I was crazy in Hong Kong. I worked seven days a week and spent more time in the studio and my office than at home. There was a lot of misunderstanding with my children; they barely saw my face and didn't know me. They were beginning to hate me, so I got scared." After a deep breath, he added, "I thought I was beginning to lose my family, so that is one reason to move to the States." With smiling relief, he concluded, "My family is important. I've been married for twenty one years, and since moving here I can spend more time with them; I can give them my love and they can understand me now. So when I was shooting the film, Sean Archer's problems were similar to myself. That is why the movie is special to me. That is why *FACE/OFF* is like my Hong Kong films, because in my Hong Kong films I usually put in the true experience from my life." □



# FACE/OFF

## REVIEW

*The doppelganger theme taken to the Nth degree*

### FACE/OFF

Paramount Pictures Presents a Douglas/Reuther, WCG Entertainment, David Permut Production of a John Woo Film. Co-Producers Mike Werb and Michael Colleary. Executive Produced by Michael Douglas, Steven Reuther and Jonathan D. Krane. Produced by David Permut, Barrie Osborne, Terence Chang and Christopher Godsick. Associate Producer Jeff Levine. Directed by John Woo. Director of Photography Oliver Wood. Music by John Powell. Costume Designer Ellen Mirojnick. Editor Christian Wagner. Production Designer Neil Spisak. Written by Mike Werb & Michael Colleary. Rated R.

Sean Casey ..... John Travolta  
Castor/Troy ..... Nicolas Cage  
Eve Archer..... Joan Allen  
Sasha Hasler..... Gina Gershon  
Pollux Troy..... Alessandro Nivola

### Steve Biodrowski

The theme of the doppelganger (or double) is a popular one in the horror genre, dating at least back to Poe's story "William Wilson," in which an unconscionable reprobate is plagued by an identical duplicate representing the moral sense he himself has lost. Later post-Freud variations on the theme tended to cast the protagonist in a more favorable light, portraying the double as a personification of the hero's own repressed, darker side, which must be defeated. The science-fiction genre eventually picked up the theme, often portraying the doubles as refugees or even invaders from a parallel universe (STAR TREK, THE TWILIGHT ZONE).

The fantasy element allowed these stories to exploit fears and questions about the nature of identity: What makes me what I am? And if my exact double usurps my place, what is left of me? However, although fantasy brings these questions into sharper relief, it is not a necessary prerequisite for exploring the theme; in fact, almost any story based on pursuit or detection will, to some extent, identify the hunter and the hunted or the cop and the criminal.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of John Woo. Films like THE KILLER and HARD-BOILED are structured around the male-bonding that occurs between two characters on opposite sides of the law whose confrontation with each other reveals their underlying similarities until they inevitably join forces. Now with FACE/OFF, Woo (working from a script by Mike Werb & Michael Colleary) has taken the theme to the next step: through a series of unlikely but entertaining contrivances, the hero and villain exchange faces and find that the only way to function

in their new guises is to take on some of the characteristics of each other.

The result is fascinating to behold, thanks in large part to tour-de-force performances from the two leads, Nicolas Cage and John Travolta. Just on a simple narrative level, the hook is unbeatable for story possibilities: How will terrorist Castor Troy exploit his position now that he's accepted as FBI agent Sean Casey? And how will Casey, trapped in Troy's body, escape from prison and reclaim his face and family? This plot is worked out in a series of engaging action sequences that rival some of Woo's best Hong Kong work. All of the slow-motion and parallel editing techniques are on display, this time abetted by all the production value that Hollywood money can buy.

The only thing that's missing here is a little restraint. Not that it would be a good idea to tone down the talent of a director noted for his over-the-top outrageousness, but the film does reach a point of diminishing returns, past which each new action set-piece (like the boat chase near the end) clearly is a set-piece—i.e., something thrown in for its own sake, rather than an integrated component that illustrates the conflict between the two antagonists.

Along the way, some truly great demands are made on audience credibility. The worst by far undermines the basic assumption of the whole plot: Casey (Travolta) has taken the face of Castor Troy (Cage) in order to get information out of Troy's paranoid brother, Pollux (Alessandro Nivola), who (we are told) is so paranoid that he would never talk to anyone but

After the face-switch, John Travolta plays Troy, who in the guise of agent Casey receives accolades for "discovering" the bomb planted by Troy.



Nicolas Cage as Castor Troy establishes the terrorist's gestures and body language before switching roles to play FBI agent Sean Casey.

Castor. In spite of this, when Troy steals Casey's face, he has no trouble convincing Pollux of his true identity—off-screen. There's a good reason we don't see this scene: if we actually observed Pollux overcoming his distrust of the agent who killed his brother, it would become obvious that the whole face-transplant ruse could have been avoided—Casey didn't need to look like Castor to fool Pollux; all he had to do was walk up to him and say, "I'm really your brother in the body of an FBI agent."

This little weakness isn't enough to undermine a film whose entertainment value is enough to overwhelm almost any critical reservations, but it does illustrate that FACE/OFF is not quite the unmitigated masterpiece that some critics have claimed it to be. More important, the doubling of the two lead characters—although taken to the science-fiction limits in terms of their appearance—is not taken quite so far in terms of their identities. Sure, Troy acts like a family man and an FBI agent, but it's clear that he is never being tempted into giving up his criminal ways and settling down. Likewise, Casey has nowhere to go for assistance except Troy's old cronies, but it is equally clear that he has no intention of adapting to a life of crime.

Their methods may be similar—each will do unpleasant things in order to achieve their goals—but their goals are so different that they don't mirror each other as much as their switched faces might suggest. Actually, one of the film's unanswered questions is what Troy's goals are. He has no political agenda. The audience is denied even the grudging identification of objecting to his methods

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## If you believe, clap your hands

### FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY

A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Charles Sturridge. Producer: Wendy Finerman. Executive producers: Paul Tucker & Steve McEveety. Director of photography: Michael Coulter. Editor: Peter Coulson. Sound: John Midgley. Production designer: Michael Howells. Visual effects supervisor: Tom Webber. Makeup supervisor: Peter King. Costumes: Shirley Russell. Music: Zbigniew Preisner. Screenplay by Ernie Contreras, based on a story by Albert Ash & Tom McLoughlin. 10/97.

Elsie Wright.....	Florence Hoath
Frances Griffiths.....	Elizabeth Earl
Harry Houdini.....	Harvey Keitel
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.....	Peter O'Toole
Arthur Wright.....	Paul McGann
Polly Wright.....	Phoebe Nicholls
E.L. Gardner.....	Bill Nighy
Tom Ferret.....	Tim McInnemy
Harry Briggs.....	Bob Peck

by Dennis Fischer

Based on the true story of the Cottingley fairy photographs, taken by two young girls, that depicted fairies flying at the bottom of their garden, this film is one of those rare fantasies that eschews boyish adventure for girlish whimsy, while taking the public story of Elsie Wright and her cousin Frances at face value. In this film, there really *are* fickle fairies who spark the girls' fancies.

Meanwhile, there are the renowned figures who helped make the lasses famous: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (a dignified Peter O'Toole) is devoted to the belief that the modern age should encompass both magic and science; his friend and frequent debater, escape artist Harry Houdini (a properly theatrical Harvey Keitel, who looks and acts the part with finesse), debunks phony mediums

At the end, the fairies make a grand entrance into the home of the two girls, signifying they don't mind having had their existence revealed to the world.



Despite its title, FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY fictionalizes the actual events (about two girls who fake some photos) by portraying the fairies as real.

who cheat the bereaved by using simple magic tricks. As such, they come to represent the forces of faith and reason, respectively.

The fairies themselves appear in myriad guises (courtesy of Shirley Russell's exquisite designs). Like true wee folk, they keep to the periphery of the picture and offer a few truly exhilarating effects shots of them flying like a combination of dragonflies and humming birds (courtesy of visual effects supervisor Tim Webber).

While the fairies offer the

wonderful possibility of magic in people's lives, much of the film remains grounded in reality. It is not hard to see why people of the early 1910s might turn to theosophy, with its belief in ghosts, fairies, and mystical insight, given the ongoing tragedy of the First World War which has claimed the life of Elsie's brother and possibly Frances' missing-in-action father. Additionally, with the advent of electricity, the "dark satanic mills" of England were not bringing the advantages of technology to many, so much as longer working hours and multiple shifts. For the young girls, childhood and innocence are almost at an end; Elsie's mother is deeply grieving; and the girls' attempt to show her the fairies becomes quite understandable, offering as it does a ray of hope.

Director Charles Sturridge does a marvelous job of re-creating this era of the past, aided by Michael Coulter's sumptuous cinematography, and wrings appealing performances from all concerned. However, one is left with the feeling that the film—albeit sensitive, lush, and delicate—lacks focus, as the disparate elements never fully merge in a fully satisfying whole. Still, it remains a highly meritorious movie that knowingly evokes what may happen when the fantastic impinges on the mundane. □

### FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY

Director: Charles Sturridge. Paramount, 10/97. G. With: Harvey Keitel, Peter O'Toole, Florence Hoath, Elizabeth Earl.

The conflict between Faith and Science, between Belief and Skepticism, is a powerful one that has been used in genre efforts as wide ranging as THE EXORCIST, CONTACT, and THE X-FILES. In the case of FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY, the plot seems tailor-made to dramatize just this sort of conflict: not only is it based on a real incident that raises the very question; it also features two larger-than-life historical characters—Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini—whose actual beliefs make them perfect mouthpieces for the opposing sides of the debate.

The filmmakers, unfortunately, are not interested in exploring this dichotomy, even though the plot makes it clear that Elsie Wright (Hoath) and Frances Griffiths (Earl) have faked some photos in order to ease the mind of Elsie's mother (by convincing her that a supernatural realm does exist, they lead her to believe that her dead son can still survive in some kind of afterlife). However, halfway through the film, we begin to see shots of real fairies. This attempt to be whimsical and fanciful does pay some dividends, but dramatically the rest of the movie is undermined (although very young children, who have managed to be patient this long, will no doubt be delighted).

The film actually has a good point, stated near the conclusion. Houdini, the skeptic, tacitly tells the girls not to give away their trick, because people will be too disappointed, and he informs the press that he sees no need to debunk the girls' claim, because it is clearly not being done to defraud innocent people. This acknowledgement of the uplifting psychological effect of supposedly magical events is much more heart-warming than the dozens of CGI shots on display.

● Jay Stevenson

Harvey Keitel stars as the skeptical escape artist Houdini, with Florence Hoath (left) and Elizabeth Earl.





CINEMA

By Steve Biodrowski

MIMIC—NIPPED IN THE BUG

*An otherwise fine film marred by an anti-climactic ending.*

I knew that MIMIC would not be a blockbuster, in spite of the stylishly crafted suspense of Guillermo Del Toro's science-fiction horror-thriller. Not that I pretend to be an infallible (or even very accurate) box office prognosticator. Nor did I have some grudge against the film that made me want to see it fail; actually, I quite liked it on most counts and wished it only success.

How did I know, then? Well, for all its effectiveness, the film employs one of my least favorite structural devices—one that also has a very low track record at the box office: the threat that drives the whole plot (in this case, an invasion of giant bugs) is thwarted before it really begins.

This observation is not original to me. Over a decade ago, I attended a seminar by someone promoting one of those "how to write screenplays that sell" methods that would supposedly analyze your script and tell you how to rewrite it so that Hollywood would shell out big bucks for it. Not much of the event sticks in my memory, but one moment stands out: the hawkier proclaimed that one of the crucial points in any film story is what we might call "the bursting dam." In other words, the protagonists have been struggling to contain some kind of steadily increasing threat, and just when it seems as if they have it under control, the dam bursts and what was previously a relatively manageable problem is now completely out of control. This was not a particularly new idea. Most books on dramatic structure will specify that the drama must build to an "all-or-nothing" decision, in which the protagonists must finally abandon halfway measures and risk everything to pull victory from the jaws of defeat. Certainly, such a decision would seem foolish on the part of any character if the problem had not reached crisis proportions.

Nevertheless, one listener objected to the insistent statement that this "bursting dam" moment was a necessary element of any box office success. "I'm just not buying it," he said. "If the script is so important, how do you explain the success of all these films with bad scripts that just rely on special effects, like GREMLINS and



After MIMIC descends into the subway to confront Rick Lazzarini's animatronic insects (inset), the film never re-emerges for a climactic attack on the city.

GHOSTBUSTERS."

As a matter of fact, the two examples he chose were the worst possible ones for his argument. Both of these films contain classic examples of the "bursting dam." In GHOSTBUSTERS, the first two-thirds of the film involves tracking down and capturing isolated spirits who are noisy and cantankerous but not necessarily threatening. Things really go crazy only after the Ghostbusters' containment unit is shut down by the EPA, releasing all the incarcerated ghosts, who swarm over New York City like a Biblical plague—thus creating a crisis situation that motivates the third act. In GREMLINS, the rambunctious monsters of the title are at first merely troublesome and annoying, but just when you think they are going to be rounded up and dispensed with, the leader, Stripe, jumps into a swimming pool (water makes gremlins multiply); suddenly, the heroes are facing not a handful of Gremlins but an entire army of them capable of overrunning the entire town. Again, this crisis expands the threat and forces the heroes to take desperate countermeasures that drive the third act.

As if to make the point even more strongly, several years later, GREMLINS 2 came out and failed to match the success of its prede-

cessor, despite generally more favorable reviews. Even allowing for the fact that most sequels do not equal the original's success, this film still fell well short of expectations. Why? Because the Gremlins never escape out of the high-rise office building where most of the action is set. The entire film builds up to the moment of their escaping outside to the city at large, and then short circuits the moment by electrocuting them before they get out! In other words, the dam never bursts, and what we've been led to expect, never materializes, leaving the audience feeling disappointed and cheated.

Consequently, when the underground scenes in MIMIC kept going, I began to get nervous. The prologue had set the film's tone brilliantly, with a lethal plague felling innocent children that gave the film a sense of verisimilitude; this was a horror film which actually wanted to make you feel some empathy for the humanity of the victims, not the usual camp-gorefest. The first act was mysterious and intriguing as it introduced the plot elements and got the characters on the trail of the bugs. And the second act, when the characters descend into the subway tunnels to gather information built up some excellent suspense. But as these scenes continued, I realized



that what should have been the third act (our heroes get back to the surface just in time to warn authorities before the bugs launch an all-out attack on the populace at large) was not going to materialize. Instead, the film has the bugs destroyed before they can arise en masse from their underground lair. As if to compensate, the film shows us a few manhole covers blasted into the air by the explosion that wipes out the bugs. This attempt to draw some visual connection between the threat below and the potential victims above (and to convince us that all we have seen really did take place in the city so effectively portrayed in the prologue, not just in some nifty studio sound stages) serves only to remind us of how weak threat of the bugs ultimately was. I'm sure budgetary restrictions were a big reason for this approach, certainly not lack of talent on the part of writer-director Del Toro, who managed to make the transition to Hollywood filmmaking while retaining much of the style that distinguished his 1994 debut CRONOS. Still, I can't help wishing that, as in the classic '50s bug movie THEM, Del Toro had wiped out his hexapod menace with a real battle, instead of letting the swarm of bugs be nipped in the bud. □



## FILM RATINGS

- Must see
- Excellent
- Good
- Mediocre
- Fodder for MST-3K

### THE GAME

Director: David Fincher. Writers: John Brancato & Michael Ferris. Polygram, 9/97. 128 mins. R. With: Michael Douglas, Sean Penn, Deborah Kara Unger, James Rebhorn, Peter Donat, Armin Mueller-Stahl.

Many critics dismissed this follow-up effort by director David Fincher (apparently they were still mad about the way he scared them silly with SEVEN), which was scripted by the writers of THE NET. However, Fincher's handling of the material is damn near perfect—and not just the visual set-pieces; even simple dialogue scenes are crafted for maximum effect. The twists and turns of this story, coupled with the way vital information is withheld from the audience, leads inevitably to a feeling that the whole plot has been constructed not as an involving drama but as an arbitrary puzzle to fool viewers—which the filmmakers can end any way they like, because they've never tipped their hands as to how much of what we're seeing is "real." However, the brilliance of the execution ultimately overwhelms this reservation, resulting in an engaging, fascinating film.

Douglas plays Nicholas Van Orton (a variation on Gordon Gecko from WALL STREET), a ruthless investment banker who is so rich and so emotionally cut off that you just know he's going to get a comeuppance. This occurs when his brother (Penn) gives him an invitation to The Game, a mysterious sort of entertainment service. Once signed up, Van Orton's rigid lifestyle is disrupted by a series of escalating pranks that eventually (seem to?) threaten his life and fortune. The question is whether The Game is really malevolent (and if so, why), or is it all contrived to shake Van Orton out of his emotional isolation. The result is a film that makes a kind of statement about the contrivance and plot manipulation of other films (in this case the contrivance is justified because it's manipulated by a superpowerful organization), emphasizing how apparently "chance events" in movie plots are carefully organized by screenwriters to help the hero win in the end. ●●● Steve Biodrowski

Andrew Divoff stars as the devious Djinn in WISHMASTER, directed by Robert Kurtzman.



Jeanne Tripplehorn (right, with Bara Sukowa) goes from mega-budget studio production of WATERWORLD to low-budget art-horror effort OFFICE KILLER.

### OFFICE KILLER

Director: Cindy Sherman. Writers: Elise MacAdam & Tom Kalin, from a screen story by Sherman & MacAdam; additional dialogue by Todd Haynes. Strand/Good Fear. Screened at Toronto Film Festival, 9/97. 81 mins. With: Carol Kane, Molly Ringwald, Jeanne Tripplehorn.

As horror films become progressively gorier and laden with special effects, it takes a lot to scare people. So many filmmakers in this genre have chosen to pull back on the gore and to add more black comedy to the mix. Though this is her directorial debut, Cindy Sherman is well-known for her still photography, which always displayed a cinematic quality. Humor is also a big part of her work, and this is in evidence in OFFICE KILLER. Carol Kane plays a repressed, frumpy workhorse in a faceless corporate firm, who is even stranger than she appears. When the company transfers her to part-time after 16 years of faithful service, Kane's character, Dorine Douglas, snaps and begins a little "downsizing" of her own. She murders co-workers and threatens blackmail to others, yet no one except slutty Kim (played by Molly Ringwald) suspects. Dorine takes care of her aging mother, but her father died years ago in a car crash. Her relationship with him had been scarred by sexual abuse, and the anger she had suppressed explodes into a murder spree. Dorine then assembles the rotting corpses around her to become the party she never had.

In addition to fine performances from Kane and Ringwald, there are a number of lesser, one-dimensional characters in the office, who are killed off early in the film. With them out of the way, the rest of the film becomes a tour-de-force for Kane, Ringwald and Jeanne Tripplehorn, who plays Nora, a woman embezzling funds from the company. These three basically carry the rest of the film. Though there is at times a lack of depth to the interactions of the co-workers, this is true of many real life corporate jobs.

Sherman didn't obsess on camera tricks or pretentious artsy cinematography which would have been obtrusive and distracting from the performances, which are the strong points of OFFICE KILLER. Despite a few obligatory scenes of gore and bloodshed, this is not your typical slasher flick. When the violence does occur, much of it is out of the frame, but Carol Kane is alternately funny and disturbing as she makes the rounds.

This is not so much an art film as a black comedy about serial killers in the 1990s, with enough horror touches to please all but the most diligent gore hounds. ●● Paul Wardel

### WISHMASTER

Director: Robert Kurtzman. Writer: Peter Aitkins. Live Ent., 9/97. 90 mins. R. With: Tammy Lauren, Andrew Divoff, Robert Englund, Tony Todd, Kane Hodder, Reggie Bannister.

A potentially interesting premise is wasted on a gore flick so intent on piling on the special effects that it never bothers to generate any suspense. The basic idea, that the Djinn (Andrew Divoff) has absolute power but can only use it in the service of granting wishes, is pretty good. The question then becomes: How can he twist the wish to serve his own ends, and how can Alex (Tammy Lauren) outwit his attempt to do this? Unfortunately, the idea is not worked out very well: most of the Djinn's tricks are either obvious clichés (wish for a million dollars and your mother dies in a plane crash, leaving you the insurance) or barely relevant (when Alex wishes to learn more about her enemy, she ends up trapped inside his magic opal; his explanation for how this fulfills her wish is laughably inadequate—basically, it amounts to, "Well, your wish didn't specifically tell me not to trap you inside the opal"). The result is that what could have been a clever game of wits turns into an excuse for a series of barely

connected effects set pieces. Too bad it never occurred to the filmmakers to have the Djinn opposed by a lawyer accustomed to the wording of fine print in legal contracts. (an idea used to good comic effect on SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE years ago). Bottom line: this idea was put to better use in a clever segment of the revived TWILIGHT ZONE, "Eye of Newton." ● Jay Stevenson

## DIRECT-TO-VIDEO

### THE PROPHECY II: ASHTOWN

Director: Greg Spence. Writer: Spence & Matthew Greenberg. Dimension Video, Buena Vista Home Video. With: Christopher Walken, Jennifer Beals, Eric Roberts, Russell Wong.

PROPHECY II is a horror-fantasy piece which paints a different picture than usual of Heaven and Earth, with an ultimate message that, unfortunately, doesn't become clear until the very end.

The film unfolds in a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles, where a new breed of angels reside. (Except for one brief scene in a church—using silhouettes—the traditional heavenly trappings are conspicuously absent.) The plot revolves around two angels who are cast out of heaven: Russell Wong plays Daniel, who has come to fulfill the prophecy (which requires him to impregnate Jennifer Beals); and Christopher Walken is Gabriel, who intends to stop him—by any means necessary. (Walken was kicked out of heaven for annoying Michael [Eric Roberts], leader of the angels.)

While the movie gets off to a slow start, it soon picks up in intensity; with a rising body count and enough action to keep you glued to your seat. Walken steals the show as Gabriel, the "take-no-prisoners" angel who is not above using anything, or anybody, to get what he wants. He also gets some of the funniest lines in the picture. (As he says at one point, "Have you ever been to heaven? It's paradise.") Wong and Beals make a good leading couple, and Roberts (in a relatively minor role) is adequate as someone trying usher in a new order in Heaven.

Direction by Greg Spence is good; the special effects are fun, and the score is excellent. PROPHECY II has everything an audience would want, except maybe characters which were better defined and a plot that was clearer earlier on. (The original film [1995] is recommended viewing before you watch this one.) ●● Sue Feinberg



## ART HOUSE

By Dan Persons

## FRINGE FILMMAKERS Overturning illusions of normality.

The filmmakers below like to play the fringe, reveling in our secret kinks, overturning the illusion of normality by steadfastly exposing the perversities of the modern life. That's why I'd like you to put aside that copy of *Femme Fatales* for a couple minutes and check this out: The primary power of Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer is his ability to poke where it hurts and not have the audience look away. In **CONSPIRATORS OF PLEASURE** (Zeitgeist, 9/97, 83 mins.), he takes on fetishism, and it's not the liberating fetishism of *ROCKY HORROR* or *THE PILLOW BOOK*. This is fetishism as it all too often really is: the secret vice that one is helpless before, the arcane fixation that can only be indulged in in privacy. The characters of **CONSPIRATORS OF PLEASURE** never speak to each other, are barely aware of each other's existence; yet their near-ritualistic indulgences unite them in ways that only we in the audience can recognize.

In his previous film, *FAUST*, it was clear Svankmajer was trying too hard—trying to meld all the techniques he's famous for (the pixilation and stop-motion animation and found-object puppetry) into one narrative, while still casting the text of the classic play against politics in fall-of-the-Iron-Curtain Czechoslovakia. He's more confident in **CONSPIRATORS OF PLEASURE** and more selective in his deployment of technology. Animation turns up only in the central section, as two neighbors enact elaborate rituals against suddenly-sentient effigies of each other; puppetry comes into play in a complex, onanistic robot that a newsdealer builds around the video image of a dispassionate newscaster (what *she* does with a pair of fish, and how that ties in with a postmistress' bizarre practices with bread I won't even begin to explain). Not a word of dialogue is spoken in the film, which—as in Svankmajer's short films—serves to universalize the characters, even as each feels his/her own isolation. Working at top form, Svankmajer captures the foolish desperation of these people, their blind attachment to the notion that their fetishes separate them from their peers. It's comedy that's almost painful in its candidness, and further proof that, some thirty-plus years after his debut, Jan Svankmajer remains one of filmdom's premiere fantasists.

Animator Bill Plympton has heard the Voice of Authority, and he isn't buying it. He sees through the proclamations too well, sees through the pretense of infallibility to a core dishonesty. In short films like *HOW TO KISS* and *THE WISEMAN*, a voice drones on in soothing counterpoint to visuals that exaggerate and mock the very words being uttered: if they extol the subtle pleasures of the French kiss, those on-screen tongues will somehow manage to probe *way* below the beltline; if they drop koans that the bespeak wisdom but actually make no sense at all,



**MONDO PLYMPTON**, a touring retrospective of Bill Plympton's work, contains all of the animator's short subjects, plus commercials and clips from features.

cowboy hats and bowlers will materialize incongruously on the guru's head. Even when the voice is implicit—presenting itself as the aura of normalcy that the protagonist of the dialogue-free *ONE OF THOSE DAYS* tries desperately to attain, with spectacularly disastrous results—Plympton makes its presence felt and understood. He's working his own revolution, here—antic, maybe, but no less incisive.

**MONDO PLYMPTON** (Bill Plympton, 8/97, 80 mins) is a touring retrospect of Plympton's work to date: all of the short films, clips from his previous and upcoming features, plus goodies such as a tongue-in-cheek, animated bio and some commercials that were banned from the air for—of all things—excessive violence. It's like an extended visit from an old friend, one who reminds us of all the things we've loved about him (the now-classic *YOUR FACE* and *25 WAYS TO QUIT SMOKING*, plus the aforementioned, brutally funny *ONE OF THOSE DAYS*) and reveals sides that we only imagined existed (the caustic Reaganomics satire *BOOMTOWN*, wherein stream-of-capitalist dialogue by Jules Feiffer affords Plympton his animation debut, and makes one wish the animator would team up with playwrights—and fellow cartoonists—more often).

It also reveals a few short-fallings: for instance, Plympton's hand-made style (he draws every frame himself) leads to a plainness of background that can wear thin after a while. Plympton has, in fact, yet to fully succeed in working his unique vision into a long-format project. **MONDO PLYMPTON** may mirror that inability, yet you'd be a fool to miss it. It isn't often you get this much gold in one place at one time.

I didn't swallow **BOX OF MOONLIGHT** (Trimark, 8/97, 107 minutes, R) for a second. This is one of those films where a weary, stick-up-the-butt businessman (John Turturro) has his outlook overturned by the attentions of a personified spirit of the life-force, in this case a buckskin-clad, forest-dwelling, lawn-gnome stealing man-child named Bucky (Sam Rockwell). This sort of thing has been done to death since the '30s and, quite frankly, I'd rather see Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn work the room under the tutelage of Howard Hawks than this rote, predictable knock-off. While director Tom DiCillo manages a few, interestingly surreal details—the use of reversed film to symbolize the onset of Turturro's crisis-of-faith; the presentation of an entire town that swears it sees the face of Jesus in a hamburger billboard where neither the protagonists nor the audience can see anything at all—the proceedings are essentially so off-the-rack that the only entertainment to be derived from watching them is in guessing which incidental detail will

show up as an ironic metaphor later on (I'm proud to say I caught "Circle Rent-a-Car" right off).

Worse is the essential dishonesty of DiCillo's presentation. Although Turturro is supposed to be liberated by his encounters with the inhabitants of Drip Rock, the director can barely conceal his fear and, at times, outright revulsion of these deep-south caricatures. (One now realizes that what saved the broad portrayals in DiCillo's previous effort, the behind-the-scenes movie-shoot comedy *LIVING IN OBLIVION*, was the double blessing of a dream-within-a-dream plot structure and the fact that, well, most film crews are close to caricatures, anyway). More damning, while it's clear this story is about Sam Rockwell's gradual courtship of Turturro (Rockwell, to his credit, manages to make his role an appealing presence without completely dissolving into a molten pool of wistfulness), it turns out DiCillo can only approach the subject indirectly, through coy, skinny-dipping sequences and—in a pseudo-Freudian moment that borders on the offensive—by having the men simultaneously bed two sisters (Catherine Keener and Lisa Blount). Next time, Tom, just have the guys kiss and get it over with. □



## NOSTALGIA

By Patricia Moir

## THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST '60s spy spoof is more timely than ever.

There may have been a time when superspy hero James Bond could be taken, if not seriously, then at least with a willing suspension of disbelief. The recent releases of the reflexive, revisionist *GOLDENEYE* and the parodic *AUSTIN POWERS* clearly demonstrate that the current post-Cold War generation of moviegoers is too savvy and cynical to buy into the romanticized, *Playboy* image of the swinging secret agent. We should be wary, however, of congratulating ourselves on the sophistication of our hindsight. Current spoofs based on the spy films of the '60s may be amusing, but they tend to obscure the fact that parodies of the genre have been around almost since its inception. The generation that produced and watched the original Bond films was also one of the most politicized in American history, and the spy satires of the late '60s and early '70s give evidence that film audiences of the time were completely aware of the foolishness of Ian Fleming's adolescent fantasies. *MATT HELM*, *OUR MAN FLINT*, and *GET SMART* were mercilessly critical of the assumptions underlying the Bond movies, exaggerating the superspy's sexual and technological prowess to ridiculous extremes and inviting audiences to laugh, rather than gasp, at the protagonists' exploits. Of all these satires, none stands out with greater distinction than

Poster art conveys the subversive tone of Theodore J. Flicker's offbeat, satirical '60s effort.



Long before *AUSTIN POWERS*, films like *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* (1967) were consciously undermining the patriotic assumptions of the spy genre.

Theodore J. Flicker's 1967 *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST*. More than a parody of the spy genre, this clever and ironic film takes on virtually every aspect of Cold War society, sparing neither establishment nor counterculture in its incisive exploration of American cultural myths and social mores.

I first saw *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* as a teenager, when it aired in the campy, Friday late-night movie spot usually occupied by '50s sci-fi and trash horror. Flicker's tale of the well-intentioned psychoanalyst, whose knowledge of the commander-in-chief's deepest secrets places him on the most-wanted list of the global espionage community, was wildly funny, but it was also more thoughtful than most satires of its kind. It brought up issues rarely treated in American films of that time: the growing dominance of corporate institutions over government, the tendency to accept violence as a necessary condition of everyday life, and the trend toward blind consumerism which ran counter to traditional American values. I was entertained, impressed, intrigued—and frustrated. The film was never rerun on local channels, and it was more than fifteen years before I was able to acquire my own copy, when I had a friend in another city tape it for me.

I was a bit afraid that my memories would prove to be more pleasing than the actual viewing, but I was not disappointed. *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* had not only aged gracefully; it had actually taken on an almost prophet-

ic significance. Flicker's portrayal of a society in the grips of what amounted to a national neurosis is, if anything, even more accurate thirty years later.

The plot, briefly, is as follows: Dr. Sidney Schaefer (James Coburn), an up-and-coming young shrink, is chosen, after intensive investigation by the Central Enquires Agency (CEA), to be the analyst to the most stressed-out man in America, the President of the United States. However, his initial excitement almost immediately turns to paranoia as he realizes that he is being pursued by countless foreign agents eager to find out what the President has been worrying about. Seeking safety, he attaches himself to a typical suburban family by concocting a story about White House opinion polls, but the plan backfires when the son, a junior James Bond with virtually no ethics, turns the family's guest in to the Federal Board of Regulations (FBR). Schaefer narrowly escapes and hides out with a travelling acid-rock band (fronted by real-life protest singer Barry McGuire), managing to achieve a temporary peace by "dropping out" and living the life of a '60s flower child.

Meanwhile, the spies, including CEA agent Masters (Godfrey Cambridge) and his friendly Soviet counterpart, Kropotkin (Severn Darden), are hot on the trail. When Schaefer is abducted by the Canadian Secret Service and then by the FBR, Kropotkin steps in to save the day. It is at this point that the film veers off into fantastic

realms. Schaefer convinces the Russian that he needs the services of an analyst more than a KGB promotion, and convinces him to offer his protection. Masters is called in to assist, but before these two lovable, neurotic spies can save their shrink from the hostile forces which surround them, he is kidnapped once again, this time by TPC—The Phone Company—which has a Bondian plan for world domination involving the implantation of personal communication devices in each citizen's brain at birth. All turns out well in the end, with faceless, corporate America subdued and Schaefer and his pals (including his CEA girlfriend) restored to their former positions in Washington and Moscow. But the film ends on a disturbingly creepy note. Ultimately, we are left with no real resolution, for the good guys are firmly entrenched in the very system that threatens them, and the powers of evil remain irrevocably woven into the very fabric of American life.

Flicker's genius lies in his ability to see all sides of the issues facing the American public. He is aware that "dropping out" is no more a solution than "buying in," that violence is not only a threat but a necessary means of defense. His protagonists are finally able to achieve an uneasy equilibrium by taking a warily subversive position within the establishment, but they must remain constantly on guard, using the security and surveillance skills of their enemies even as they are monitored by those in higher positions. Flicker's world is one in which paranoia is not a delusion but an entirely appropriate and healthy response to reality.

This is not to say that *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* in any way condones the realistic ills of society and world government. Lest we forget that his satire is grounded in truth, Flicker takes care to make us painfully aware of the horrors of living in a paranoid and violent world, punctuating his fantastic, comic plot with moments of remarkable realism. For example, Schaefer's relatively sane and civilized conversation with his Canadian captors is interrupted by the appearance of the FBR, whose murder of their rival





James Coburn and Joan Delancy in *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST*.

agents is so sudden, ugly, and brutal in the otherwise humorous context that the viewer's senses are left reeling. Throughout the following scene (an Abbott-and-Costello-like bickering dispute between the FBR agents who can't decide who should fetch more ammunition to finish off their prisoner), we are not so much amused by the clever dialogue as horrified by the trivialization of the extreme violence which immediately preceded it. Similarly, we are repeatedly shocked by the willingness of relatively benign characters to explode into uncharacteristically violent behavior whenever it can be justified. The casual way in which guns are handed about (and finally used) by average citizens blurs the line which divides civilians from professional killers. Flicker seems to suggest that it is impossible to remain neutral and still survive in what the world has become.

While *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* is unquestionably a product of its troubled and somewhat revolutionary times, it raises important questions for audiences of the '90s. The approach of the millennium has brought us to the brink of that which Flicker foresaw thirty years ago. Substitute Microsoft for TPC, and JFK conspirators for CEA spies, and you have a pretty accurate picture of the popular tone of our own times, in which the cult of paranoia has become a prevailing force defining our views of social and political order.

*THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* is available now in a home video version which contains some extra moments not found in the

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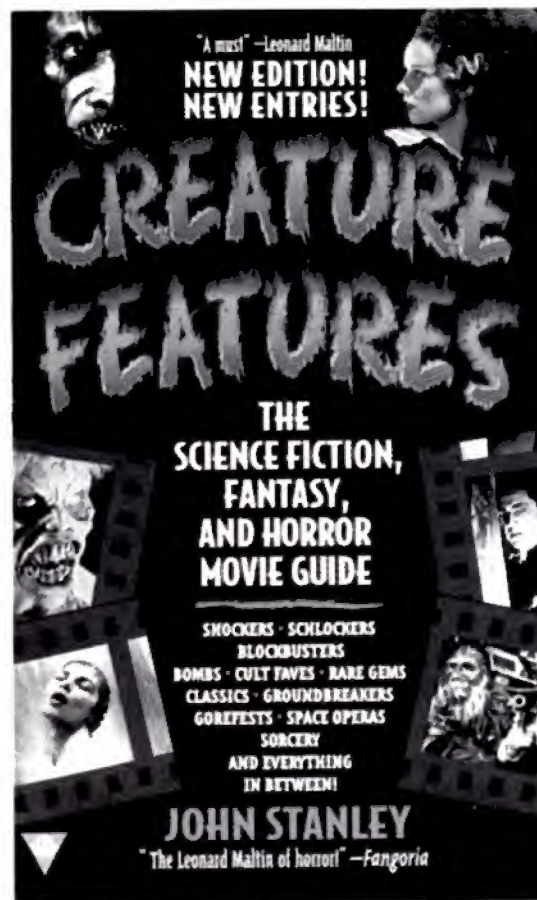
## BIBLIOFILE

By Dan Cziraky

In this age of instant access to almost every film ever made on some form of home entertainment medium (video, laser, DVD), more and more self-proclaimed movie experts are crawling up out of the mire, waving their moldy pedigrees and seeking out their natural prey: a publishing contract. If you think I'm exaggerating, then I submit the following volumes as evidence that we are in fact being inundated by the opinions of people with too much free time on their hands.

*Creature Features: The Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Movie Guide* (Boulevard Books, New York, 1997, 582 pages \$7.99) is the revised and mainstreamed version of John Stanley's trade paperback, *The Creature Features Movie Guide* (1981). Stanley does possess impressive credentials (thirty years as an entertainment writer for the San Francisco Chronicle and host of the Bay Area's CREATURE FEATURES movie program from 1979 to 1985), and he has personally viewed each of the over 4,000 films in the book. Unfortunately, in the transition to mass-market edition, a lot of charm has been sacrificed. Previous revised versions had quirky titles (e.g., *Revenge of the Creature Features Movie Guide*) and were illustrated with movie stills and genre-inspired drawings by Kenn Davis (who also provided the amusing cover paintings). All these are missing from this fifth edition, as well as reviews of "older titles, obscure and/or lost movies" that made way for 500 new titles. Part of the appeal of the *Creature Features* books, however, was finding entries for rare, half-remembered films of our misspent youths. Still, Stanley has an amiable reviewing style and an obvious respect for the genre. The films are rated from one to five stars (a new feature of the guide), and there is a list of video and laserdisc sources for collectors. Unfortunately, the book is littered with spelling errors (Irwin "Alley," "Reginalf" Nalder, etc). With so many other genre guides spewing opinions about the same films, perhaps the best recommendation for the latest *Crea-*

## CREATURE FEATURES Invasion of the Genre Movie Guides



The various editions of John Stanley's *Creature Feature* film guides have been condensed into one convenient paperback pocket book, minus the illustrations.

*ture Features* is its new mass-market format, making it portable for those trips to the video store.

Visible Ink Press of Detroit has taken the "video guide by committee" idea to the extreme with their *VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever* series. These gigantic trade paperback collections of reviews are notable for their mammoth size, as well as their handy indexes for casts, directors, film retitlings, and other categories. Not content with putting out just the one annual edition (weighing as much as the average New York City Yellow Pages), the *VideoHound* team have compiled three genre guides:

*VideoHound's Sci-Fi Experience: Your Quantum Guide to the Video Universe* (1996, 445 pages, illustrated, \$17.95) takes the usual *VideoHound* style (light, breezy, a forced sense of "hip") to 1,200 films and gives the material a stylish presentation, with stills and snippets of dialogue. The approach is highly similar to *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*. There are informative sidebars on everything from Ray Harryhausen to Godzilla—a device that appears lifted from *The Phantom's Ultimate Video Guide*. The book con-

tains indexes of useful facts, but the video and laserdisc distributor information is often outdated or incorrect, and many of the reviews are almost verbatim reprints of those in *Golden Movie Retriever*.

*VideoHound's Complete Guide to Cult Flicks and Trash Pics* (1996, 439 pages, \$16.95) is best described as "The Even More Blatant Rip-Off of *Psychotronic Video Guide*." However, with only 1,100 titles reviewed, it isn't nearly as "complete" as it wants us to believe. The critiques have been revised for cult fans, so PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE, which received a denigrating "Woof!" in *Golden Movie Retriever*, now carries the "four bones" highest recommendation. The usual beloved dreck (Andy Milligan, Troma, etc) is included, as well as more obscure directors like Jorg Buttgerit (NEKROMANTIK); however, recent cult "discoveries" like Coffin Joe (Jose Mojica Marins) are absent, and space is taken up by mainstream efforts like STAR WARS and STAR TREK that are already covered in *Sci-Fi Experience*. Again, a lot of video and laserdisc distributor information is off in the indexes. *Cult Flicks* is a serviceable guide at best, and the "damn, we're too cool" review style wears thin pretty quickly.

Finally, we have *VideoHound's Vampires on Video* (1997, 335 pages, \$17.95), "compiled in cooperation with J. Gordon Melton"—which is a follow-up to Melton's *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead* (Visible Ink, 1994). Melton, supposedly a "recognized authorities on vampires," reminds me of comedian Professor Irwin Corey: like Corey, if Melton doesn't really know something, he concocts an outlandish tale that he brazenly presents as fact! In *Vampires on Video*, Professor Corey—I mean, Dr. Melton—botches his very first entry, claiming that ABBOTT & COSTELLO MEET FRANKENSTEIN (1948) portrayed "the death of Dracula...consumed by the first rays of the rising sun." Excuse me: the Wolf Man (Lon

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## LASERBLAST

By Dennis Fischer

## COLOSSUS/SILENT RUNNING

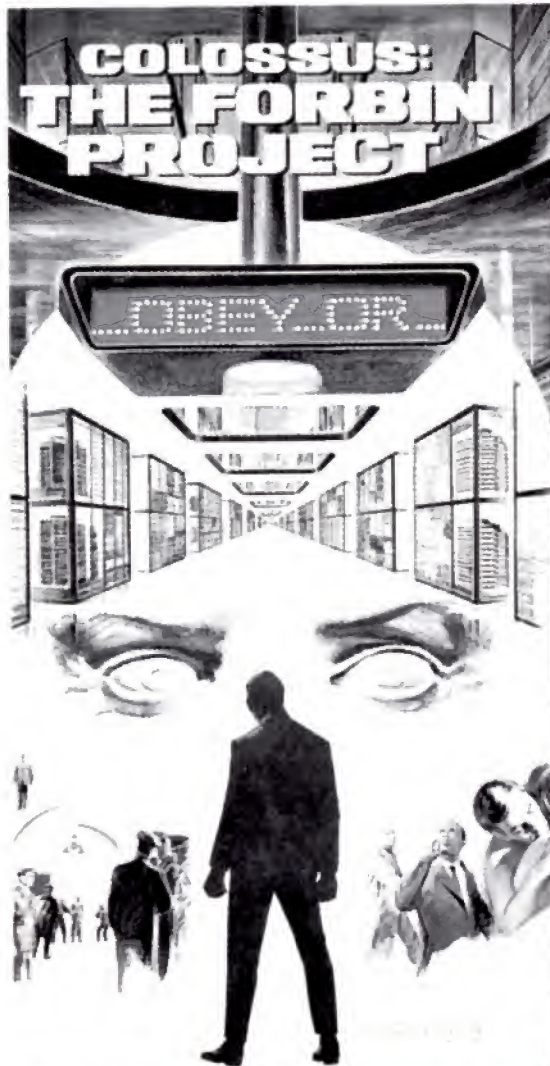
Recent releases of classic science-fiction and horror

Recent months have been particularly good for laser devotees of Hammer and science fiction films. Elite Entertainment has recently picked up the rights to distribute laserdisc releases of the Hammer films previously released by 20th Century-Fox. These titles include some of Hammer's best (THE DEVIL RIDES OUT; QUATERMASS AND THE PIT; VAMPIRE CIRCUS) and worst (THE LOST CONTINENT; THE VIKING QUEEN; THE VENGEANCE OF SHE) films.

Elite's premiere release in this series is a deluxe widescreen edition of DRACULA—PRINCE OF DARKNESS, Christopher Lee's 1965 return to the part of Dracula, after HORROR OF DRACULA (1958). The script by Jimmy Sangster (under the pseudonym of John Sansom) provides no dialogue for Dracula (Lee has claimed he refused to speak, preferring to play Dracula as silently fearsome and feral.) For the first time in a Hammer picture, a Renfield type character is introduced, amusingly played by Thorley Walters, and in the picture's most powerful scene, Dracula forces Diana (Suzan Farmer) to drink from his chest to initiate her into vampirism (another concept that returns to Stoker's original novel). Andrew Keir's Father Sandor is a somewhat secular cleric who assumes the Van Helsing role in the absence of Peter Cushing and does a more than adequate job.

DRACULA—PRINCE OF DARKNESS was shot in a widescreen aspect ratio, unlike its predecessor, the climax to which is reprised at the beginning, necessitating that the edges of the screen become fogged. Unfortunately, this reprise sets a standard and pace that the rest of the film cannot match, though the film benefits from Terence Fisher's careful direction and Bernard Robinson's elegant set designs, putting it ahead most of Hammer's subsequent Dracula films.

The film's narrative develops relatively slowly, establishing a pair of English couples, Charles (Francis Matthews) and Diana,



Among the many classics released on laserdisc within the past months, a standout is the double bill of **COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT** and **SILENT RUNNING**.

and Alan (Charles Tingwell) and Helen (Barbara Shelley), who come to Dracula's castle where a sinister servant, Klove (Philip Latham), ends up sacrificing Alan and using his blood to revive his master. Thus Dracula is not introduced until the story is half over.

Amusingly, this does not prevent Christopher Lee from dominating the commentary track—which, thanks to the auspices of Hammer devotee Ted Newsome, re-teams Lee with Farmer, Shelley and Matthews. Shelley reveals that Farmer did all the screaming for her in the film. Lee complains about the difficulties of scampering about in his bloodshot contact lenses. Apart from Farmer, none of the participants had seen in the film in quite some time, and they revel in spotting old colleagues or familiar pieces of scenery. This gives the commentary a very friendly, beguiling atmosphere, though it does not always produce the most insightful reflections from the participants.

The print used is sharp and clear, an original 35mm interposi-

tive from 20th Century-Fox, but the colors do seem muted and could have been punched up in the transfer. The sound is so sharp that one can hear a door slam in the background from the original recording session of James Bernard's score. As a welcome bonus, home movie footage by Francis Matthews' brother, which originally appeared in Newsome's documentary on Hammer, is included, with the commentary participants joyfully identifying the various behind-the-scenes people. The disc also includes the film's theatrical trailer and its combo trailer with its co-feature **PLAGUE OF THE ZOMBIES**.

**PLAGUE OF THE ZOMBIES** has also been released by Elite in its proper 1.85 aspect ratio. Both transfers have been produced by William Lustig (director of **MANIAC COP**). While it is nice to see **PLAGUE** looking the best that it has in years, mysteriously, the pre-credit sequence on this print has been placed after the credits. Additionally, the "day-for-night" material in the film is too light, making

creepy night scenes look like daylight. Still overall, the print is sharp and clear, though there are some scratches apparent during the opening credits.

John Gilling's Cornish horror film does feature a few very memorable moments of imagery, notably the voodoo priests in their unkempt masks, the shots of a zombie carrying a woman by a tin mine, as well as a dream sequence of zombies reviving in their graves. However, it was soon eclipsed by the more energetic zombie film of George Romero and others, leaving it of interest primarily to Hammer fans.

Andre Morell makes a better than average Hammer hero as Sir James Forbes, a doctor summoned by his former student to a Cornish village, where a mysterious disease seems to be decimating the local population. It appears that an aristocratic squire (John Carson) is bleeding the life out of the town by exploiting the local population both before and after death. (He uses zombies to work his presumably shut tin mines). Unfortunately,

not much is made of this theme, and the film is structured as a mystery that the title does much to give away. Decide for yourself if it deserves its designation as one of a "Cornwall classic."

Additionally, MGM/UA has decided to release a couple of Hammer films to which they have the rights. First to **THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT** (original American title: **THE CREEPING UNKNOWN**), which is found on the boxed set **UNITED ARTISTS SCI-FI MATINEE VOLUME 2**. Some knowledgeable person elected to present a British print which runs 3 minutes longer than the American version. The film represents Hammer's first foray into horror filmmaking and remains one of the more intelligent science fiction efforts of the '50s. Brian Donlevy stars as the extremely driven scientist Bernard Quatermass, who oversees the pioneering efforts of British space exploration. Unfortunately, their first manned rocket has crashed, and only one of the three astronauts, Caroon

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## Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here

### EVENT HORIZON

A Paramount release. Produced by Lawrence Gordon, Lloyd Levin, Jeremy Bolt. Directed by Paul Anderson. Written by Philip Eisner. Cinematography (widescreen): Adrian Biddle. Editor: Martin Hunter. Music: Michael Kamen. Production design: Joseph Bennett. Costume design: John Mollo. Visual effects supervisor: Richard Yuricich. Digital effects: the Computer Film Co. 8/97. 97 mins. R.

Miller.....Lawrence Fishburne  
Weir.....Sam Neill  
Peters.....Kathleen Quinlan  
Stark.....Joely Richardson  
Cooper.....Richard T. Jones  
Justin.....Jack Noseworthy  
Smith.....Sean Pertwee

by Steve Biodrowski

Here is a major studio film, with a substantial budget for high-quality production value, that somehow manages to look little better than low-budget Roger Corman productions like *BATTLE BEYOND THE STARS*.

Part of the problem rests with the current obsession with computer-generated imagery. The anti-gravity effects achieved with this technique may be eye-catching, but they are never convincing. They are too glossy and shimmery, like a hyper-real cartoon; they might work in a fantasy or surreal con-

text, but in this supposedly high-tech science-fiction environment, they are out of place.

An even bigger part of the problem rests with an overall lack of vision. Director Paul Anderson shoots things to look cool, and he even sometimes achieves this, but he has no grasp on how to modulate the visuals to carry the audience gradually into the deepening nightmare of the plot and the increasingly dire straits of the characters. His work is functionally competent, in terms of getting the camera coverage to tell the story, but he is unable to elevate a story that was barely worth telling.

The script posits the notion that the lost ship *Event Horizon* may have gone to Hell and back while making a faster-than-light jump into hyper space. Apparently, it brought back some of the Evil with it, or at least some kind of malicious alien intelligence inhabiting the ship as a whole. But that's about as far as it gets in exploring the premise, which turns out to be just a lip-service explanation to justify killing off most of the crew



Justin (Jack Noseworthy) moves toward a confrontation with the evil force inhabiting the *EVENT HORIZON*—a film that is all buildup and no payoff.

of the *Lewis and Clark* rescue ship.

Also suggested is the idea that the horrible visions plaguing the rescue crew are not supernatural events but hallucinations dredged up from the subconscious by the ship. This would be fine if the characters' inner neurosis were developed with any kind of depth, but a very strong cast is left playing the most undefined of characters—they're so undifferentiated that you almost wish the script had resorted

to clichéd stereotypes just to distinguish them from each other.

Ultimately, the idea of astronauts plagued by physical manifestations of their inner demons was handled better in Corman's *GALAXY OF TERRORS*. And while we're noting similarities with other films, did we really need an amalgam of the above-mentioned titles, along with *THE BLACK HOLE*, *SOLARIS*, and *THE SHINING*? □

## More Ray Harryhausen than Robert E. Howard

### KULL THE CONQUEROR

A Universal Release. Produced by RaDirecto. Directed by John Nicolella. Screenplay by Charles Edward Pogue, based on the worlds and characters created by Robert E. Howard. Cinematography (widescreen): Rodney Charters. Production design: Benjamin Fernandez. Music: Joel Goldsmith. Editor: Dallas Puett. Special Effects supervisor: Kit West; visual effects supervisor: Richard Malzahn. Makeup effects: Giannetto de Rossi. 8/97. 95 mins. PG-13.

Kull.....Kevin Sorbo  
Akvasha.....Tia Carrere  
Taligaro.....Thomas Ian Griffith  
Escalante.....Litefoot  
Zareta.....Karina Lombard  
NJuba.....Harvey Fierstein

by Steve Biodrowski

Rafaella DeLaurentiis' previous effort, *DRAGONHEART*, may not have been great, but at least it had a nifty dragon that was more entertaining than anything on display here. *KULL THE CONQUEROR* is so determinedly lightweight that it seems to float away before our eyes, like a wisp of smoke that dissipates, leaving no trace of its existence. For all the talk of how different Kull is from Hercules, Kevin Sorbo's rendition of the barbarian

isn't very barbaric; in fact, Kull is so nice that his tough guy attitude seems a mere pose. One can only assume that opting for a kinder, gentler barbarian was calculated to appeal to fans of his *HERCULES* TV show. The result is a film that has more in common with the Ray

Harryhausen than Robert E. Howard—except that Harryhausen efforts like *THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD* made much better use of their visual resources to transport us into an entertaining fantasyland of the imagination.

The script (which Charles

Kevin Sorbo's Kull strikes a menacing pose, but underneath he's really a nice guy.



Pogue rightfully disowned after uncredited rewrites) goes through the usual paces: there's an evil demoness, and the hero travels great distances to obtain a magical something-or-other to defeat her. None of this is brought to life with any flair: the staging by director Nicolella is strictly perfunctory, and the "money" sets, like an ice cave, look like they belong on the Universal Studios tour, not in a movie. Once again, CGI prove distinctly lacking: the magical flames at the end do not for a second seem capable of actually burning anything.

Underlying the whole film is a contemporary tone that undermines the attempt to make an epic fantasy set in an imaginary world of the past. Most of the cast is so "20th-century" that the film would have worked better as a parody. (At least Tia Carrera, though her performance is only adequate, looks somewhat exotic.) Let's hope that next Howard adaptation can truly take us to the Hyborian Age. □



## Not the titillating tour-de-force of temptation it should be.

### THE HUNGER

#### THE SWORDS:

Director: Tony Scott. Writer Howard A. Rodman, based on the story by Robert Aokman. With: Balthazar Getty, Amanda Ryan, Jamie Foreman.

#### MENAGE A TROIS:

Director: Jake Scott. Writers: Jordan Katt, Vy Vincent Nygo, based on a story by F. Paul Wilson. With: Karen Black, Lena Heady, Daniel Craig.

#### NECROS:

Director: Russell Mulcahy. Writer: Steven Salzberg, based on a story by Brian Lumley. With Philip Casnoff, Celine Bonnier, Leonardo Cimino.

#### HOST SEQUENCE:

Director: Tony Scott. Writer: Howard A. Rodman. With: Terence Stamp.

Showtime. 8/97, TV-MA.

by Frederick C. Szebin

In its increasing attempt to offer what network television cannot (and that, I must admit, accounts for much), Showtime unleashed this fevered anthology, focusing on stories that titillate but don't necessarily entertain.

Style is the name of this game, and the show offers plenty of that, beginning with its Host Sequences, eerie monologues by Terence Stamp that set up and then conclude the tales within. Tony Scott has undoubtedly seen *NATURAL BORN KILLERS* more times than is truly necessary—or healthy—because his wraparound is as cloudily crowded with flash-frame edits and camera-lunging close-ups as that inspiration, but to a blunted and, at times, annoying effect. Stamp offers some genuinely creepy lines in these sequences, so all is not lost.

"The Swords" is the first tale



"The Swords," directed by Tony Scott, features mystical young woman (Amanda Ryan), whose stage show involves being impaled by swords.

up, about an American (Getty) sent to England by his father to study the cosmetic market in the hopes that he will let loose his evil, drug-filled ways and walk in Dad's footsteps. What he does, as if it needs explaining, is find the seediest people, who take him to one of the seediest dives in London, where a mystical young lady (Ryan) allows swords to be pushed through her lovely frame with no wounds at all. A paid liaison between the two creates an uneasy love affair that leads to her membrane (which she explains protects her from the sharp objects) being broken in more ways than one: a nasty blood stain on Getty's bedspread offers the not-so-subtle metaphor for this

membrane—and during her next act... (you get the idea).

This is followed by the more effective, and the most entertaining segment of the three-show pilot movie: "Menage A Trois," with Karen Black offering a stunning portrayal of a handicapped and corrupted old woman cared for by a string of agency nurses who leave the premises in various states of distress (at least one committed suicide), until nurse Reynolds (Heady) joins Black and her handyman Jerry (Craig). As Reynolds continues to care for the literally twisted old woman with her morphine-only medication schedule, a sudden and bizarre transformation overtakes the young nurse until it is realized by Jerry, far too late, that his cronish boss is psychically controlling the young woman to continue her life of debauchery, if only vicariously.

This leads into "Necros," the most overtly fantastic of the stories titled after a local folk tale of a dead thing that feeds on the living. Bill Cobb (Casnoff) rebuffs the old stories, despite the fact that there have been disappearances linked to old Mr. Nero, wonderfully played by Cimino. Nero's lady is supposed to be off limits, but there you go. Cobb discovers, also too late, that he has merely been a pawn so that the devil can have four for bridge.

Shows like this must be taken on a variety of levels: adver-

tised for its adult content, *THE HUNGER* has plenty of that, with sex scenes ranging from sensual and enticing to down-right violent, and damned if they aren't actually important to the script! Really, the sex as shot leads us into the minds and twisted worlds of the people having it. Such scenes are rare, but they do happen. On that level, at least, *THE HUNGER* delivers. Also, its scripts, particularly the host sequences, are well-written and the individual stories are chosen from literary sources, always a good way to go. But there aren't any real surprises, no sense of foreboding, or even a little O. Henry-ish twist ending to keep the separate tales from being mere framing devices for the sex sequences. And even then, I found myself wondering "How did the actors do that without really doing that?"

The performances on all levels are excellent, the camera work superb, although occasionally distracting, as in Tony Scott's "The Swords." Jake Scott injected some real energy into "Menage A Trois" with some intriguing Eisensteinian composition, and even a bizarre little picture of the morphine being injected down the tube from the plunger's point of view! But all of this camera-friendly, thoroughly obvious filmmaking just doesn't make *THE HUNGER* the *tour de force* it could have been. That would have had to have started with the scripts. Literary sources are preferred, but choose them for their literary quality, not just their sexual content. □

The best episode of the pilot film is "Menage a Trois," with Karen Black (seated), Lena Heady, and Daniel Craig.



Leonard Cimino in "Necros," one of three episodes in the kick-off to Showtime's new series of lust and temptation, *THE HUNGER*.







Detective Francisco (Pierpoint) undercovers a TELEFON-like conspiracy in **THE UDARA LEGACY**.

## ALIEN NATION: THE UDARA LEGACY

Director: Kenneth Johnson. Writers: Renee & Harry Longstreet. Fox Television, 7/97. 2 hrs, w/ commercials. With: Gary Graham, Eric Pierpoint, Michelle Scarabelli, Lauren Woodland, Sean Six, Terri Treas, Lane Smith.

Although never reaching the level of *STAR TREK*, the fan base of *ALIEN NATION* was enough to allow the show to continue past its single season on the Fox network in 1989-90. Kenneth Johnson (*STEEL*) gave the series enough style to please the sci-fi crowd and to touch the heart of any thinking audience. With the *UDARA LEGACY*, the latest *ALIEN NATION* TV-movie, Johnson continues to find the human in the alien and the humane in the human.

*THE UDARA LEGACY* is definitely the weakest of the lot (one hopes this isn't the last word on what has been a generally fine series). Before the Newcomers ships crashed in Arizona, the Tectonese inhabitants ran two resistance fronts: the accepted line of offense against their captors and the Udara, a kamikaze organization whose violent methods became feared by slave and captor alike. Their final battle against their overseers was to be met with their children; a mind-altering drug was injected into their eyes so that they could be called upon at any time and would have no memory of their indoctrination or their mission. When the ships landed on Earth, the cause was over as Newcomers acclimated into society.

Detective Francisco (Pierpoint) discovers not only that the feared Udara are being resurrected but also that his wife (Scarabelli) is one of them. Someone has gotten the list of unknowing Udara and are activating them on the eve of a major election. Think of it as *TELEFON* with spots. Plot points are clumsily introduced so that the picture can get on to its foregone conclusion in a script that telegraphs more than Marconi ever did. What keeps the film from being a total disappointment is the cast, uniformly excellent as always, despite the weak script. Should there be further adventures for Detectives Sikes and Francisco, a little more time should be taken for script development so there will be a lot less formulaic dramatics and more of the insightful, exciting SF drama for which *ALIEN NATION* is known.

●● Frederick C. Szebin

## THE WATCHER

By Frederick C. Szebin

For those of us who remember the olden days of three networks and PBS, this past summer was a little daunting with its off-season series debuts daring to interrupt the mind-numbing comfort of reruns. Brash young upstarts pushed their way into the haze of July with surprising variety and varying levels of sustained interest.

Former teen idol Shaun Cassidy followed up his sadly short-lived CBS series, *AMERICAN GOTHIC* (an excellent horror show that deserved better than the network gave it) with *ROAR* on FOX. Set in 4th Century Ireland, the series details the adventures of handsome young Conor (Heath Ledger), and his three friends in arms: Sebastian Roche, Vera Farmiga, and John St. Ryan. Just before Christianity drove down their Celtic beliefs, Conor stood as a uniting force for his people, encompassing their bravery, beliefs, and spirit in the Roar, a bellowing howl that meant the end for their enemies.

Among such, is Diana (Lisa Zane, Billy's sister). Along with a 400 year old mystic Roman soldier unable to die, she plans Conor's fall, but the daring Druid has Right on his side and has thus far avoided the slings and arrows of Diana's fighting forces. *ROAR*'s production is a handsome one with religion-tinted passion, political intrigue, well-choreographed fight scenes (*HERCULES* still out does everyone, however), and a sense of honor weaving through the scripts

Ralph Bakshi's *SPICY CITY*: In the episode "Have You Seen Mano Mantillo's Hands?" the answer is definitely "yes" for one unfortunate gangster.



## PERVERSE PLEASURES Cable TV lives up to its promise.



HBO's *PERVERSIONS OF SCIENCE* is better than its lurid title implies.

that is a refreshing change of the "blast 'em ta hell" attitude of late. Old world honor is something of which our culture has lost sight. *ROAR* not only gives voice to that ancient concept but also provides involving entertainment just before it gets too preachy.

From the ancient past to the distant future, we look at Ralph Bakshi's *SPICY CITY*, the adult animated series that premiered on HBO. Here, Bakshi is back in his element: cartoons for big kids that encompass the darker sides of the human psyche. *SPICY CITY*, interestingly enough, is an anthology with Michelle Philips as the voice of our guide, a saucy siren who en-

tices us into her scandalous tales of passion, love, violence, lust, hate, fear—all the good stuff of drama. *SPICY CITY* is a computerized nightmare filled with users, losers, and victims of the day.

Bakshi uses cartoons for more than mere laughter or illustration; his creations punch through the Envelope and shear across the Edge with brazen content brought to life with the same talent needed for Film Noir, New Wave, Expressionism or, when necessary, an embittered Disney-esque resonance. But where Disney wanted to charm, Bakshi wants to beat, and *SPICY CITY* has the potential to renew the promise that *FRITZ THE CAT* offered in 1972. Cable television may finally be owning up to its promise of more variety for more audiences with programming such as this and *PERVERSIONS OF SCIENCE* (HBO).

Despite its racy title and even racier hostess (a computer-generated female robot realized in the classic *HEAVY METAL* style, who begins each story with a twist of her chrome nipple), *PERVERSIONS OF SCIENCE* is not a bad show. Once you get past the overt, high-schoolish nonsense of the host, *PERVERSIONS* lives up to its source material, the EC comic, *Weird Science*. With that title already taken by the USA network (for the series based on the 1980s John Hughes movie), the *PERVERSIONS* moniker was slapped



on a show with more class and substance than the title implies, but that's cable—its idea of offering viewers something the networks cannot is to twist the nipple.

But **PERVERSIONS** is far better than that, offering the same quality in scripts, performance, and overall undertaking given in **TALES FROM THE CRYPT**. The same production company has dug deep into EC's storehouse of bizarre and enticing SF to give life to the comic panels that changed pop culture forever in the 1950s. It is hoped that they don't overlook Ray Bradbury's contributions, and continue to keep tongue in cheek only when necessary.

HBO isn't the only cable station offering dollops of computer generated SF. The Sci Fi Channel has finally jumped into the void with their first original series, **MISSION GENESIS**, loosely based on the *Deepwater* novels by Ken Catran. In this weekly derivation of the author's tales, six handsome twenty-something clones are prematurely brought out of hibernation aboard a deep space vehicle when the ship and its precious cargo, the remnants of humanity, are threatened by an alien force.

We never get to see this threat close up, only their CGI ship, but the whole episode was merely a means to an end: the newly awakened crew must get to know each other, rediscover their mission, and carry it out. Their only assistance is the memory implants imbedded in their brains and the hologram of the ship's computer, who was damaged during the initial attack.

Earth, you see, was devastated by a plague that eventually wiped out the Mars base as well, but not before the survivors managed to clone five of their best, install them and the genetic codes of mankind in *Deepwater*, and launch them into space to find a new world. With that backstory in place, the 13 episodes follow the humans and their hologram on various half hour adventures that bring them closer as a unit, but no closer to their final objective. It's basically the **GOOSEBUMPS** of science fiction shows with Youth as a waving banner marching into the future. The stories aren't very challenging—they have to remember how to control the ship to avoid catastrophe, reinstate the programming of their computer before it destroys them all, and find trust, loyalty, and understanding in a harsh, unknown universe.

There's lots of CGI to varying



In Fox's **ROAR**, Conor (Heath Ledger, center) and friends battle against a variety of enemies, including evil mystics and a 400-year old Roman soldier.

degrees of success, though never approaching the grandeur of any episode of **BABYLON 5**, and the young cast of unknowns handle themselves well with what they're given. The show isn't **THE STAR-LOST** by any means, but it's no **STAR TREK**, either. Perhaps given time, and a chance to learn that Youth has its disadvantages as well, **MISSION GENESIS** can broaden its scope beyond its obvious budgetary limitations. What is here is diverting, but not much else.

Remembering our past, before age and experience became such an apparent burden, was a recent episode of Showtime's **THE OUTER LIMITS** that dipped into the trough set before it and remade one of the original series' most famous episodes, "Feasibility Study." I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I'm unfamiliar with the original. (Well, I've been busy.) But the remake written (again) by Joseph Stefano and directed by Ken Girotti is, very simply, one of the very best examples of televised SF in the history of the medium.

A high-security neighborhood and its paranoid, distant residents are teleported to another planet where the controlling aliens have gathered similar groups from other worlds for study to discover which species can better serve them as slaves. Turns out we human types are quite resilient and are pegged to be the new worker class. But the

aliens, and even some of the humans, didn't count on our species' inner strength and demand of personal choice. The gathered specimens purposefully expose themselves to an alien disease to fool the overlords into believing the rest of humanity is just as unfeasible as the other species they've gathered. For people who didn't even know nor care about their neighbors less than twenty four hours earlier, this is a truly noble and brave gesture of biblical proportions.

Stefano's textured script and Girotti's assured direction take a sci-fi cliché and make it gripping, touching entertainment. David McCallum stars in a performance that is a revelation for those who remember him only from his teen idol days in **THE MAN FROM UNCLE**. He proves once again what a crime type-casting is not only to the actor in question, but to the quality of our drama overall. The man deserves at least a Cable Ace, if not an Emmy nomination.

Also concerned with the past was a special called **TV GUIDE LOOKS AT SCIENCE FICTION**. William Shatner hosted this smorgasbord that ran simultaneously on USA and the Sci Fi Channel. The sweep of the show was not quite all of SF TV from the 1950s to today. Many glaring omissions were in evidence in an overview that ignores any comment of a remotely critical nature, and stands as a fluff piece as in-

substantial and disposable as the publication that is its namesake.

Beginning with the grandfathers of the genre, Shatner effuses over such early SF fare as **CAPTAIN VIDEO** and **TOM CORBETT: SPACE CADET**, playful SF adventures that ultimately yielded to the more thoughtful presentations of **TALES OF TOMORROW** and **THE TWILIGHT ZONE**. In the show's one attempt at any thoughtful evaluation of its subject, the histories of the SF programs are linked with the social and scientific advances and turmoils of their times, but this tact is soon discarded in favor of quick clips, sound-bite interviews with SF collector Bob Burns, actors Jonathan Harris (**LOST IN SPACE**) and Robert Culp (**THE OUTER LIMITS**), and producer Chris Carter (**THE X-FILES**). Nothing of any real value is revealed, and this so-called overview includes such infantile programs as **LOST IN SPACE** and **BATTLESTAR GALACTICA** among the more revered programs of the genre. Brief clips from **HOLMES AND YOYO** and **THE LOST SAUCER** are added derivatively—as they should be—but no real attempt is given to discuss their horridness, just as nothing new is added to the histories of the true classics of the genre, like **STAR TREK**, **THE OUTER LIMITS**, and **THE X-FILES**.

TV movies are ignored completely, which is a shame. Clips from such TV features as **THE QUESTOR TAPES**, **TOMORROW'S CHILD**, or **THE LOVE WAR** would have been a nice change of pace. And no such overview has ever spent a modicum of time on the promising but missed opportunities of such short-lived series as **QUARK**, the varying qualities of **THE MAN FROM ATLANTIS**, or the value of such beloved imports as **DOCTOR WHO** and **BLAKE'S SEVEN**. What this genre deserves is a detailed tribute similar to Brownlow's and Gill's poetic **HOLLYWOOD: THE PIONEERS** series—something of substance and value, instead of the glancing pomp of visual cotton candy like this.

The Fall season promises to be the most SF-intensive in the history of television. If last summer was any indication, quality is on the rise. But like the entertainment industry has so often shown, it's belief in quantity has often outdistanced the quality of its output. Time will tell, and I'll let you know. □



## STARSHIP TROOPERS

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it was great and it was great working for Paul.' It was just amazing; they were looking at it like this was a career high. My theory is: everybody had to work a little bit above their level. They were all professionals, twenty-year people who were in the film business for real, and I think they were challenged and they took the challenge, and I think it shows in the movie."

The rumors did not stop with the wrap of principal photography. One favorite during the post-production stage: that the Sony brass were not at all happy to discover that a "queen" bug (actually the all-controlling brain bug) had wound up looking less like an arachnid than a humongous parody of female genitalia. Verhoeven ascribed the story to misperception: "That started with somebody telling *Variety* that it looked like a vagina, or something like that. It was an article of Michael Fleming's or something in *Variety*. I never saw it; it had to be pointed out to me. All the studio executives and the top brass of Sony have seen the movie, and I would think they would be the first people to be afraid of this. But there was no comment at all; nobody sees it that way. It's really an insect orifice: the palp comes out and kills you. That's what it is, but if you start looking in a certain way only at the orifice, yeah, you could mistake it. When you see [it in action], because it's clearly about something else, it doesn't come to the mind."

More vexing for the production has been the continued speculation as to why Sony decided to push TROOPERS from its potentially lucrative, July 2nd opening to its current berth on November 7th. "I believe that the studio felt that this summer was extraordinarily crowded," said Davison, echoing statements heard from many of the top-level personnel. "Most of the pictures were either sequels or star-driven, so there was some kind of marketing hook to hang them on. The studio wanted to have STARSHIP TROOPERS in time to screen it well in advance for audiences and press, to start building up positive word-of-mouth. If we had to make the July 2nd release date, it would have been delivered just days before the release and the screenings couldn't have happened. The result of the delay is that we have been able to spend even more time on the special effects (especially the spaceship sequences) and have been



Rico (Casper Van Dien) beats a retreat from battle tank bug in STARSHIP TROOPERS.

able to make them bigger and more elaborate than we would have if the film had been released earlier."

While this reasoning contains a core logic—no point in releasing a mega-budget blockbuster if you can't work up a good head of P.R. steam to herald its arrival—it begs an important question: why, nine months after the wrap of principal photography and over a year after the start of production, was the show still awaiting shipment of its special effects? Definitive answers are not forthcoming, but sources close to the production claimed the problem could be traced to Sony Imageworks who overestimated their ability to bring the aforementioned spaceship sequences in on-time, and so necessitated the eleventh-hour recruitment of Industrial Light and Magic, BOSS Films, and Mass Illusion to pick up the slack. Though all representatives of SPI stated that they would have been able to meet the July 2nd release date, most also admitted that work delivered on such a schedule would have been, at best, a compromise. "This was a large amount of work that had to be executed in a relatively short amount of time," said SPI senior visual effects supervisor Scott E. Anderson, "Particularly given the industry right now, where everyone this year was so swamped, we couldn't just hire everyone in the world we wanted to. We had to try to build a small team that could get the work done. The overall focus of building that team, getting the facility on-track, trying to keep everything flowing forward and keeping Paul happy was always quite a challenge."

Said ILM's George Murphy, "I think probably more at issue was the fact of just the competition for resources with CONTACT [another show simultaneously in production at SPI]. Sony's working on a lot of big projects at one time, and

I think with TROOPERS—like any film like this—as you get into it and you really start to flesh out what's happening, the work tends to grow. That's been true on almost any film I've ever worked on here. How easy or how hard it is to deal with that will depend on how much resource pad you have going at the time. Sometimes you can throw people and machines at something and get out of a real bind; sometimes you don't have that."

For his part, Verhoeven chooses not to level responsibility at people who, by all accounts, invested blood, sweat, and tears in his project. Instead, the director cited a newspaper report that Sony Pictures opted to replace STARSHIP TROOPER in the July 2 slot with MEN IN BLACK, from Spielberg's Amblin production company, which was originally scheduled to open in June, shortly after the Memorial Day debut of Spielberg's THE LOST WORLD. "Spielberg and the other people wanted these days, and had more clout than we have," said Verhoeven. "At least that's what I read in the newspaper; nobody said that to me."

Whether or not Spielberg exerted any influence to prevent his two Amblin productions from opening close together, it made sense for Sony not to place MIB in competition with the Universal Pictures dino-opus. Given STARSHIP TROOPERS's rumored effects delays, the maneuvering may well have saved Verhoeven and crew from rushing to market with a product that could have been markedly better.

Said Verhoeven, "Look at how MEN IN BLACK is doing. That was our original date, wasn't it? So we were there, and then they basically moved us to the end of July, and then AIR FORCE ONE took that date, so we were suddenly in November. And I must say, to

be honest about the whole thing and without holding it against anybody, in retrospect it was an excellent decision. Because it gave us the time to do the effects as we wanted them."

In the end, it is just as likely that no one will even remember the lateness of TROOPERS' effects. However, though one can never underestimate the appeal of digitally-enhanced explosions, rampant killer bugs, and enough blood to float James Cameron's TITANIC, this stuff was designed to be seen in summer. "I've accepted it," said Neumeier of the delayed opening. "I'm disappointed—I think this movie could have torn up the summer,

but that's just my sort of red-meat, macho bent towards my business." Added Verhoeven, "Is it a pity that a movie that was supposed to be a summer movie is now a fall movie? Yeah, probably. Will it affect the movie financially? I'm not sure. Am I happy that I got the extra time? Yes, I am. I think we could do a better job this way than having released in the beginning of July. Yeah, I had to swallow hard for a moment. After that I was happy with the delay."

Exactly how happy Verhoeven will be may depend on how eager the public is to go where the director is leading. As with ROBOCOP and TOTAL RECALL, Verhoeven is walking the line again, depicting a functional, fascist society that's bracketed with a prominent set of air-quotes, but that's also presented with such slam-bang, mass-market appeal that viewers with more than two brain-cells to rub together are likely to begin questioning their own willingness to be seduced by the happy, shiny futures that haven't been so overt in delineating the social costs involved.

For Neumeier, so complex a balancing act has definite appeal: "It could engender responses in people that are in contradiction. The fascism is clearly labeled as fascism, and some people could take it as, 'Wow, cool—fascism!' and other people could take it like, 'My God! They're talking about fascism!' But I think that that's kind of amusing, because it makes fun of what people want right now. I was reacting a little bit to the sort of P.C. environment we've had in the last five years. What you have is this contradiction: here is a P.C. world that works, but it happens to be a military dictatorship. I think that's something that's interesting to think about."

Concluded Verhoeven, "There's a certain irony to [TROOPERS so-



ciety], of course. It's not as if I'm a strong believer that that's the way to do it; it's just that these people in this society believe in it. There is a kind of a nuanced situation here: the characters are likable, but at the same time you would put a question mark behind their political outlook. But that, for me, is the situation in the United States, anyhow. In the FedNet, sometimes there are elements shown where it says, 'Censored.' And if you follow the debates about the television rating system, you can certainly see that, in a disguised way, it's the same kind of censorship situation. In my view, I'm still mirroring elements of American society in the movie. It's just not an exercise in thought; it's clear that there are elements of American society that have a high regard for the military and would argue that violence is the only way to solve things. That's doubtful, but that's the society that I'm portraying.

"You can really look at this and say, 'Is this utopia or dystopia?' Heinlein is much more straight about it—there's no criticism or irony in the book. I don't believe in it, of course, but my characters do. And that's what makes it interesting." □

## ILM/STARSHIP

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ILM committed two motion-control stages and a CGI crew of about twenty to the project. One of the most complex tasks to confront both facilities was the mating of a CGI fleet-trainer to a 60-foot long, motion-control tunnel. "They fly through the interior of this lunar ring," said Murphy, "and up, out to the exterior. There's a whole, very long tunnel sequence in there and we ended up building that model from scratch. As the motion control roves through this tunnel, every six inches we have to pull it apart. It was manipulated on hinges so that we could reassemble it and pull it apart on the fly as we went. Worked very well."

ILM discovered—along with their brethren over at SPI—that some tried-and-true effects techniques still have value in the computer age. "Considering the amount of things they're trying to shoot," said Murphy, "there's a lot you can get out of building a model and then being able to light it, move it around. While computer graphics gives you a certain kind of flexibility, it also has a sort of penalty, a kind of a time-lag on the front-end on what it takes to actually get there. You can, in a few days, make some very consider-



With four battle scenes, *STARSHIP TROOPERS* had to avoid repetition. For example, the first attack takes place at night, emphasizing flashing guns and shadowy attackers.

able changes on a physical model that might take you a few weeks in computer graphics just to get it all tweaked with the level of detail that you're after.

"A few years back, everybody thought that CG was going to be the answer to everything, everything was going to be CG. Really, the right answer is you keep your toolbox and your variety of techniques and you use the best mix of things for the shot." □

## SONY IMAGEWORKS

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editing. "We're doing shots that work in long trains of continuity," explained Radford. "That is: instead of having a big payoff shot with a lot of ships moving around in space and relating to each other, and then cutting back inside to a complete reverse where you just see someone's face reacting to it, then jumping out again where things have progressed in time, we will see an event start from one camera position, say a God's-eye point of view, then pop back into a ship that is witnessing the same thing, looking out the window, so that from shot to shot to shot to shot, we have to keep everything working in continuity right down to the pyro explosions and the subtleties of motion and positioning. That's actually really tough to do, and you'll notice that people have very cleverly avoided dealing with that in previous films that have done this."

"The kind of space battles you're looking at in this picture are way beyond anything anybody's ever seen before," confirmed Merkert. "The amount of destruction—the amount of mayhem events, let's call them, are truly amazing: there are ships that are hit; there are ships burning in the background; the ship that the camera is on gets hit. And all of it ties together very understandably to

the viewer. It's as if you've got twenty cameras on a flotilla of ships in the Pacific Ocean when they're attacked by bombers. You can see the entire event from any point of view you wish, and it always makes sense from wherever you view it.

"One of the things we're doing is we're keeping viewers in the movie by making the spaceship shots believable in context of the movie. We give them a real high level of finish, and that means that viewers don't pop out of the movie by seeing mistakes or shots that have less production value than others. You simply can't do that with non-digital technology. The kind of compositing that we're doing, the kind of 3D elements, effects animation elements that are in the show, just aren't available with non-digital techniques." □

## TIPPETT

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own. Instead these little chariot bugs swarm around beneath him, and kind of lift him up from the ground."

Once the brain bug was designed, his movements were enhanced by studying footage of real insects, particularly an undulating Queen Bee larva. "That footage was really hideous and disgusting," recalled animator Blair Clark, "but it really helped the animators working on the brain bug, because it inspired these undulating ripples we have going through him."

Although the bulk of animation was done by animators sitting at a computer screen, clicking a mouse, several stop-motion animators, like Tom Gibbons, Randy Link and Kirrie Edis elected to work with the motion-input device that Tippett devised for *JURASSIC PARK*. "The bug input device allows animators to use an armature with encoded sensors on it,"

explains Tippett. "Whatever character you're working with in armature form is displayed in wire-frame on a computer screen. You manipulate the armature from pose to pose, just as you'd do with a stop-motion model, and the encoded sensors translate that same movement to the computer model."

"The corollary between stop-motion work and CGI work is really close," maintains Tippett. "Once stop-motion people get past the technology it's very easy, because you're working in three dimensions, and it's a lot easier for 3-D people to work in a virtual 3-D world, as opposed to 2-D animation. It invites a lot more people to work in animation." □

## IRONSIDE

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to overcompensate for it. I wanted to make him more human as his humanity was basically being less and less called upon."

And as far as Michael Ironside was concerned, Paul Verhoeven was reason enough to climb aboard *STARSHIP TROOPERS*. "I actually accepted this film before they negotiated any money. I said, 'Yeah. If it's Paul, I'll do it.' It's hard to explain or to get somebody to understand what it is to work with somebody who knows what he's doing. I've done quite a few films; I've probably only worked with, at best, a dozen directors who have a vision, who have their journey through the forest plotted, and no matter what the pressures they stay on that journey. Whether you agree with their vision, or agree with their point of view doesn't matter. They are out to tell their story their specific way, and are very much in control. Paul's one of them; David Cronenberg's another; so are Walter Hill and Tony Scott.

"I'll tell you why I enjoy working with Paul: you'll find directors that deal with close-ups and they're right there, but when it comes to an insert shot or a master shot or something like that, you'll see them sort-of relax. Paul puts the same amount of energy into every shot. I don't care if it's an over-the-shoulder, insert shot of a piece of paper, or whether it's a huge master shot with three hundred people getting slaughtered, or whether it's a love-scene close-up. They all get that same, incredible focus. That makes me feel very, very safe. There's no doubt who the storyteller is.

"The parent of the picture is in charge—all I have to do is my job. That's a wonderful place to be." □



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## ALIEN 4

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because he hadn't worked here yet. On some level we knew it would be more work-intensive, but worth it."

Principal photography took place through the winter and spring of this year. Shooting fell behind schedule in part due to the language barrier between Jeunet and his cast, and the director's unfamiliarity with making a big-budget film in America, where crews are larger and differently structured than in France. There were script changes as well: budget considerations led to the dropping of a few action sequences and the writing of a more cost-conscious climax. Ultimately, a summer release was moved back to November to accommodate the lengthened shooting schedule and the film's elaborate post production phase, including the computer animation of a new alien hybrid.

According to Whedon, the challenge of such revisions is to maintain the original dramatic structure. "The first consideration was that everything inform the same emotional arc. For me, it's all about Ripley's arc, and I spent a lot of time dealing with resurrection and what these things mean to me. It is about humanity and Ripley reclaiming herself, accepting herself, and resurrecting her identi-

ty after they resurrected her body."

"Jean Pierre has done an amazing job," concluded Saralegui. "He's killing himself, but he's making a great movie. Every shot is gorgeous. The performances are really good. Usually, I'm very measured about how good these things are, but I'm more than happy with it. This one has a completely distinct vision, more than any other one in the series." □

## PRESIDENT'S ANALYST

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usual TV broadcasts. The few seconds of restored footage (including expanded credits) add nothing to the plot, but do improve the timing of some scenes, and the color is definitely superior to that of most TV prints. Unfortunately, for copyright reasons, the original Barry McGuire song accompanying one of the film's most effective scenes has been replaced with a soundtrack much less appropriate in tone, so you'll probably want to get both versions to savor the film's full effect.

Maxwell Smart and the Man from U.N.C.L.E. may seem like little more than cultural kitsch today, but the *President's Analyst* is still contemporary and wholly relevant three decades later. His fear, frustration, and ultimate anger are all-too-recognizable to the every-

man of the '90s. Whether Flicker's solutions to his universal dilemmas are viable is a question which still demands an answer. As the deadline for solutions appears to be drawing closer, *THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST* is more timely viewing than ever before. □

## BIBLIOFILE

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Chaney, Jr.) destroyed Dracula (Bela Lugosi) by grabbing the vampire (in bat form) and plunging from a balcony into the sea. (Melton is obviously thinking of either *HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN* or *HOUSE OF DRACULA*.) His listing for *HOUSE OF DARK SHADOWS*, the 1971 film of the TV soap opera, has Carolyn Stoddard played by Kathryn Leigh Scott, when she was actually played by Nancy Barret; Scott played Maggie Evans. Melton then confuses the character of Maggie with Victoria Winters, who he claims was played by Lara Parker. Actually, Alexandra Moltke played Winters, and Parker played the witch Angelique—but only on the show; neither these characters nor the actresses appear in the film! Mistakes like these abound, calling into question the book's usefulness as a reference guide.

All four of these books contain at least some useful information,

but none is indispensable. Though the new *Creatures Features* might appeal to those who own the previous editions, the three Video-Hound guides overlap in so many areas (do you really need three similar reviews of Jim Wynorski's *NOT OF THIS EARTH?*) that their combined purchase price offers poor return on your investment. Additionally, any self-respecting vampire buff will steer clear of *Vampires on Video* and look for David J. Skal's *V is for Vampire*, instead. □

## FACE/OFF

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while sympathizing with his aims. Casey, on the other hand, though obsessed with hunting down Troy, never becomes an anti-hero—because, after all, he is trying to stop a man who wants to kill large numbers of people for no apparent reason. The result is a film that never calls into question Hollywood's typical good guy-bad guy dichotomy as much as *BLADE RUNNER*. Ultimately, *FACE/OFF*'s plot device is put to good use, and it does lend a certain thematic subtext that grounds the action. But it is the action, not the subtext, that is the key attraction here. And that is more than enough to make this a worthwhile effort. □



## LASERBLAST

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(Richard Wordsworth), has survived, and his physical structure is changing. Quatermass concludes that an alien menace has invaded Caroon's body and absorbed his companions. The film is an intelligent condensation of Nigel Kneale's riveting TV serial, and writer-director Val Guest's documentary-like style give the story added weight and believability.

The boxed set also includes Curt Siodmak's best directorial effort, **MAGNETIC MONSTER**, a gripping science fictional mystery starring Richard Carlson and King Donovan. It's about a lone wolf scientist's accidental invention of a monster element that incorporates impressive special effects footage from the German film **GOLD**. Next is a letterboxed transfer of the rare CinemaScope and color science fiction western **THE BEAST OF HOLLOW MOUNTAIN**, which suffers from a ponderous beginning involving Guy Madison and Carlos Rivas as cattlemen with a Mexican ranch (along with some offensive Hispanic stereotypes), but also offers an exciting climax beginning on side five featuring the legendary Willis O'Brien's stop motion effects of a Tyrannosaurus attacking the cowboys. Lastly, the set ends with Edward L. Cahn's **INVISIBLE INVADERS**, in which disembodied invaders assume control of corpses. Unfortunately, the narrative of Cahn's film is not tightly focused, and the film meanders to its final, unimpressive conclusion as John Agar, Robert Hutton, Philip Tonge, and Jean Byron retreat to Bronson cave to create a counter-weapon against the incomprehensible invaders and save the day. All films are transferred from sharp prints and are generously chapter encoded; trailers for **MAGNETIC MONSTER** and **THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT** have also been included.

Another treat for science fiction fans is the double-disc release of a pair of the better '70s sf films: **COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT** and Douglas Trumbull's **SILENT RUNNING** (MCA Home Video). Both features are letterboxed, sharply transferred, and are chapter encoded. **COLOSSUS**, based on the novel by D.F. Jones, concerns the creation of a super-computer with artificial intelligence that will provide the U.S. with the perfect national defense. Unfortunately, **Colossus** has a mind of its own and uses the weapons under its control to extort the U.S. to establish a link with Guardian, its secret Soviet coun-



Christopher Lee (l) and Francis Matthews in **DRACULA, PRINCE OF DARKNESS** (1965), now available on laser disc, with audio commentary by the cast.

terpart. Eric Braeden stars as **Colossus'** creator who tries to regain control of the project while under **Colossus'** intense scrutiny. The film even eschews the typical Hollywood ending for a more adult one.

**SILENT RUNNING**, on the other hand, is more visually opulent but more problematic. The hardest thing to swallow is its basic conceit that Earth has become totally environmentally controlled and that the last remaining forests have been shipped out on transports orbiting Saturn. On the plus side, it features one of Bruce Dern's finest performances as Lowell, the last man who cares about the forests, who turns on his companions when their destruction is ordered. It also features three fascinating robots (played by paraplegic actors) that audiences come to care about without totally anthropomorphizing them, along with impressive spaceship effects from Douglas Trumbull, who created some of the more realistic spacecraft in films up to that time. (The interiors, shot on an abandoned aircraft carrier, are also highly realistic). Some might object to its obvious, pro-ecology sentimentality (the script is by Deric Washburn, Steve Bocho, and Michael Cimino), and the run through Saturn's ring sequence does not really work, but I still find it a simple and affecting film of a man rebelling against the processed crap back on Earth, fighting loneliness and madness, and sending at last a hopeful message to the stars.

Also underrated is director Byron Haskin's **THE POWER**, which MGM/UA has released in letterboxed form on a double disc with producer George Pal's misfired fantasy **ATLANTIS, THE LOST CONTINENT**. **THE POWER** benefits from being based on Frank M. Robinson's interesting SF novel.

George Hamilton plays a scientist at a research facility where it is discovered that one of their number is a superintelligent being with incredible mental powers, perhaps the next step in man's evolution. Unwilling to be exposed, the culprit, who once had the name Adam Hart, causes Hamilton to be fired and other scientists to die. As Hamilton investigates Hart's background, he is repeatedly attacked and vital information begins to disappear (the plot is in part a variation on Welle's **CONFIDENTIAL REPORT**, aka **MR. ARKADIN**). As with any George Pal production, there are a few impressive effects sequences, and the talented cast includes Suzanne Pleshette, Michael Rennie, Earl Holliman, Arthur O'Connell, Aldo Ray, Yvonne De Carlo, and Richard Carlson; but the story, which takes more than a few unexpected turns, is what really shines. The film deserves a far better reputation than its relative obscurity would indicate.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of **ATLANTIS, THE LOST CONTINENT**, which I enjoyed at a kiddie matinee years ago, but which does not hold up well. Anthony Hall stars as a Greek fisherman taken to the lost continent after rescuing the princess (Joyce Taylor). He is persecuted by the jealous Zaren (John Dall) who has a doctor (Barry Kroeger) transform slaves into Beastmen that mine a giant power crystal which Zaren hopes to use to conquer the world. There is also **GET SMART's** Edward Platt as a hypocritical high priest who believes in the one true God and who disrupts Zaren's plan long enough to unleash lots of stock footage from **QUO VADIS** and sink the island. The stilted dialogue and performances sink the film a lot sooner. Both films on this set feature the lush color typical of Pal productions. □

## OFFICE KILLER

continued from page 43

the last gory effects movie, and horror film makers are beginning to realize that there are few new thrills for an audience desensitized by years of blood and guts.

Sherman agrees: "There were some final script versions that I had actually toned down because they had been written so that you're seeing her hack off the hands and watching what's being done to people's bodies. I obviously wanted all that to be off-screen. Even though I think I made the film that I intended to make, now I'm starting to question how it's been talked about. I just get nervous about people's expectations. This is a different sort of business than making art, because there's more money involved and it's sort of out of my hands at this point. But I'd rather people know that it's not a blood and guts fest."

Cindy Sherman's strange title effects, and unconventional use of the camera in shooting the gorier elements of the tale, lend artistic subtlety without veering into showiness. Perhaps if, as she said, she could have had a bigger budget, we would've seen more effects or more style, but we may have lost the inventiveness that occurs when an artist finds ways to solve problems out of necessity, yet at the same time uses that necessity to achieve an unexpected approach.

The film will be released on December 3 in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, in art-house theatres for a limited two-week run.

And, mused Sherman, "Depending on how it does, I guess [that will determine] where else it goes." □

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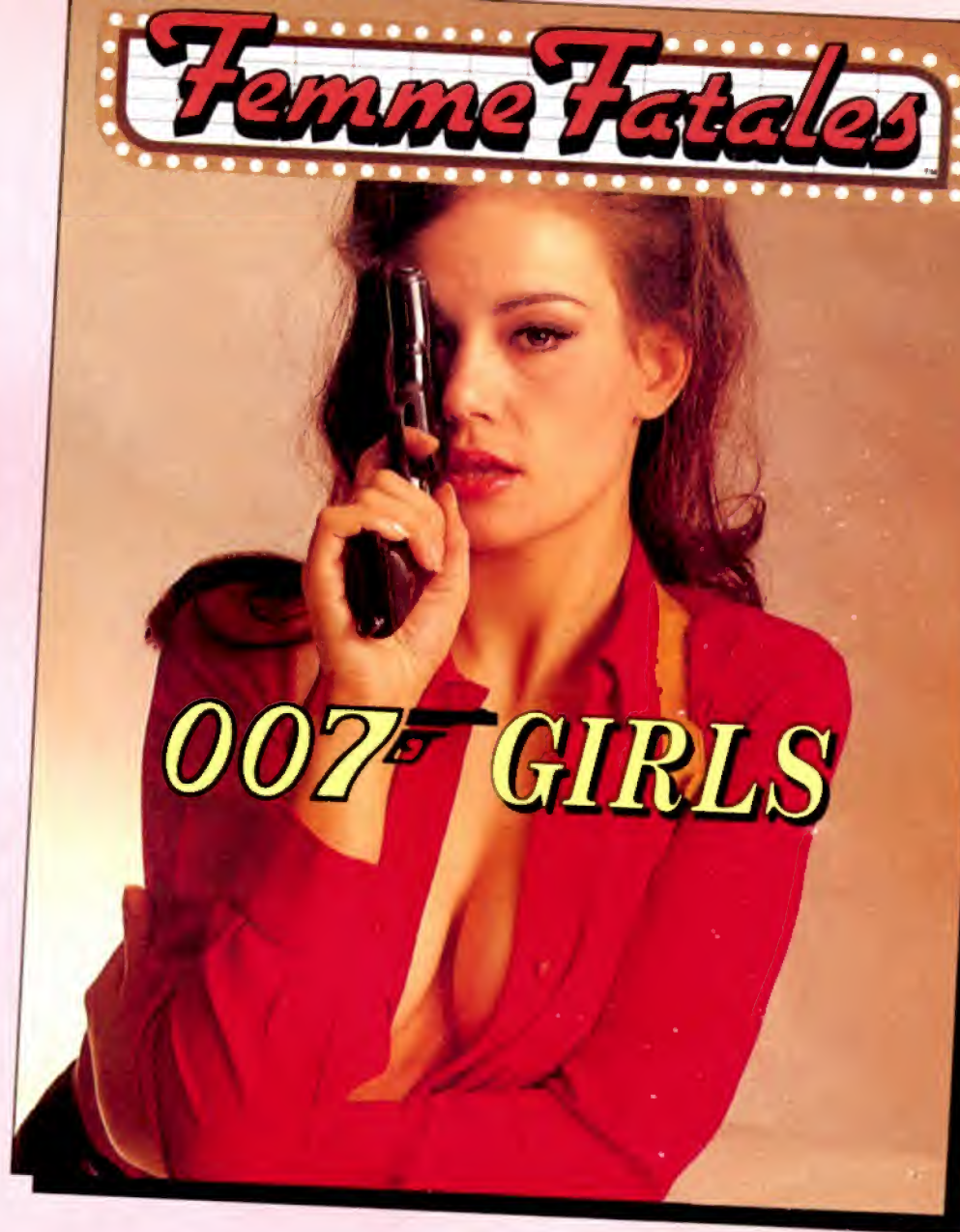
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Plus, the debut of a new live-action embodiment of temptress Vampirella, and a profile of comic illustrator Amanda Conner, and a look at Edgar Rice Burroughs' '40s serial JUNGLE GIRL. Subscribe today and pick up those back issues you may have missed!

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